

The Road to Hell

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/8529196) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8529196>.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Rating: | General Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Blake's 7 |
| Characters: | Kerr Avon , Roj Blake |
| Additional Tags: | fanzine fic |
| Language: | English |
| Collections: | Fanzine Era Fanworks |
| Stats: | Published: 2016-11-11 Words: 32,442 Chapters: 1/1 |

The Road to Hell

by [Suzan Lovett](#)

Summary

The bandages came away at that moment and Avon's words caught in his throat. He stared at the metal housing and the intracath sunk into Blake's wrist over the major arteries, the sharp point of the spring-action needle glittering like a diamond chip on the edge of it. "Oh, hell," came out with the breath he expelled as if he had been punched in the stomach.

Notes

This is an alternate-universe story based on the episode, *Hostage*. It starts taking liberties with the established story-line shortly after Avon, on the hillside, contacts Blake through the teleport bracelet, and totally disregards the rest of the episode.

This story was originally published in *Powerplay #1* in 1987.

The Liberator entered the Sol system from above the elliptic plane. It dropped out of deep space into the concealing shadow of an agricultural satellite, long-abandoned, drifting: a navigation hazard. The Federation traffic stayed away from the area. Jenna Stannis edged the ship carefully around the hulking derelict, then readied it for a prearranged, fast, and totally unconventional orbital pass around Terra. None of the crew had pleasant memories of their last stop there. Gan's empty chair was still a silent reminder.

Alone on the flight deck, Jenna kept the controls firmly in her hands as Zen kept watch on the Federation patrols in the vicinity, and Orac listened along tarial paths for the slightest indication that the Liberator had been spotted. For the second time in the last days, the detector shield seemed to be serving its purpose. So far. *Just a little longer*, she prayed, to no one in particular, while the blue and white planet grew larger on the screen.

One more pass, and perhaps their only chance.

Jenna was still astonished that Avon had agreed to take this one chance. Agreed? He had damn near commanded it. And that was too uncharacteristic of him for the pilot's peace of mind, if such a thing could exist with Kerr Avon in residence.

His inexplicable behavior pattern had started while the Liberator was in orbit around Exbar. Avon, the same Avon who firmly believed that people should be given plenty of rope if they insisted on hanging themselves, had been almost obsessive about safety measures before Blake had teleported down. Even then he had seemed unable to relax, and had suddenly jumped up to announce he was following Blake. Later he had summoned Vila down to the planet as well.

Shortly afterwards, all hell had broken loose when four pursuit ships and one command ship had popped out of time distort, practically on top of the Liberator. Jenna had been too busy trying to stay ahead of disaster, but still close to Exbar for the teleport to operate, to find out exactly what had been happening on the planet.

She had later gathered that Cally had retrieved Vila quickly, but Avon had been delayed.. There had been no sign of Blake, a situation unchanged since then. After some eavesdropping, Orac had informed them that the command ship had landed on Exbar and left it again, with a prisoner. Another ship -- Travis', by all indications -- had taken off from the planet, followed by two pursuit ships. The Liberator still had to deal with the two remaining Federation vessels, and by the time one was immobilized and the other one destroyed, Avon had been tersely requesting to be teleported back up.

When Avon -- looking disheveled, scratched and breathless as if he had been running at a breakneck pace through bushes -- had barged onto the flight deck, he had informed them that the prisoner taken away by the command ship was Blake. Jenna had wondered how to make him agree to a rescue attempt. But Avon had not waited to be persuaded or forced. He had demanded immediate pursuit of the command ship, only to be told by Zen that the nearly-depleted energy banks had to be recharged first. The pilot had listened, with her mouth hanging open, as he had promptly threatened to reduce Orac to its components if it lost Blake's trail in the meantime.

Orac had finally led them to Earth two days ago, over five days behind the command ship. Anything could have happened to Blake in that time. Jenna spared a hand to open a channel to the teleport section. "Almost there, Cally. Get ready."

It was Vila who answered. "She's been ready. Any more ready and she's likely to freeze there permanently."

"Shut up, Vila." Cally's voice drifted through, a tight edge to its usual softness. "Ready, Jenna. Just give the word."

"Right. In about three minutes."

Orac was sure Blake had been taken to the Interrogation Section of the Federation Security Complex, a sprawling annex to the largest dome-city in the Northern Hemisphere. Jenna would have preferred to be the one to infiltrate it, but her piloting skills bound her to the flight console. Cally had volunteered immediately, although she had to know her unfamiliarity with Earth was a major handicap. Even Vila had managed to mutter something that sounded like he might be willing to go along. Avon, already outfitted, had brought all discussion to a halt by striding in, announcing that he'd be the one to go, period, and disappearing into the teleport effect before anybody had a chance to say a word, leaving it up to Orac to direct the crew according to his instructions.

And, coming from Avon, that was simply too unbelievable. The man was nobody's martyr. Although concern and loyalty might not be foreign concepts to him, he chose not to acknowledge his acquaintance with them. Cally seemed to understand what was driving Avon this time, but she wasn't talking beyond the cryptic. She did keep assuring Jenna that once Avon decided to do something he didn't do it by halves, and that was true, but exactly what Avon had decided to do, and why, was still questionable. Jenna couldn't trust the man. It was hard to trust someone who went out of his way to prove he didn't care to be trusted -- heaven forbid, he might have to live up to it one fine day.

There.

"Now, Cally," Jenna said into the intercom, then held her breath.

* * *

Cally punched the buttons and pulled the levers, her motions quick, precise, sure -- conflicting reactions tumbled in as the teleport functioned. Two forms materialized, one supporting the other, and Cally was relieved. Apprehension followed when one form solidified into Avon, but the other was clad in the black uniform and the masked helmet of a Federation guard. For a split second, she hoped the slumped figure Avon was holding upright was Blake, but his bulk could not have possibly fit into that uniform. She lost all hope when Avon dumped the man onto the deck with less concern than he would have given to a sack of potatoes.

* * *

Only silence was coming through the intercom. Jenna couldn't take it for another second. "Cally! Do we have them? Is Blake back?"

"Uh, no, Avon's here, but ... Avon, what happened? Who's that?"

"Who's who? Avon!" Jenna shouted. "Where's Blake?"

"Not here," Avon's voice issued from the console. "Not yet. Take us out quick. We're going to make another circuit. Cally, help me. Vila, bring Orac to the medical unit. Be careful with the uniform, Cally. I'm going to need it."

Jenna clamped down on her immediate need to know and swung the Liberator around. First she had to get the ship to a safe distance.

* * *

Heading into the medical section, Jenna could hear Avon arguing with Orac.

"Don't be difficult, Orac. I need his palm prints. Short of cutting off his hands and carrying them with me, how do I...?"

"You can't!" a desperate voice, a stranger's, interrupted hysterically. Then Jenna was in the room and could see its owner: a young man, stripped to basics, under heavy restraint on one of the examination tables. "No, please, no, you can't!"

"Oh, yes, I can," Avon informed him matter-of-factly, without so much as a glance at the terrified man. "Except it'll be damned inconvenient, not to mention conspicuous. So shut up and don't push your luck."

"Who is that?" Jenna asked.

"Someone who can get into places I can't," Avon supplied shortly. "Well, Orac?"

As I have informed you before, 'well' is not a ...

"Orac, I'm not in a particularly tolerant frame of mind."

Even the machine seemed to know when it was unwise to push one's luck with Avon. *Very well. The surest way to utilize his palm print and avoid detection is, of course, skin grafts.*

Jenna saw Avon clench his hands...protectively? He sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say that. Won't rejection be a problem? I have to be alert; I don't need suppressants slowing me down."

Not if your own tissue is used. Sufficient amounts can be grown from a culture in thirty hours.

"I don't have thirty hours," Avon objected.

He did have thirty hours and more, Jenna knew. It was Blake who might not have it. She was finding it very hard to adjust to Avon's new attitude. There had to be a catch to it.

In that case, Orac continued, *the skin will have to be removed from your body, from the inner thigh, I should think, to afford the right texture and sensitivity, then molded and imprinted with the 'signature' you require prior to grafting. The tissue regenerator can be programmed to alter tissue patterns as well.*

"How long will it take? I'll have to have full use of my hands and we have precious little time."

Once you have modified the tissue regenerator in the manner I shall specify, the surgery itself should not take longer than an hour. You will have full use of your hands as soon as the local anesthetic wears off in another hour or so. After all, the trauma will be little more than skin deep.

"Avon," Cally asked softly, "are you sure you want to...?"

"No, I don't want to, but as I couldn't find any other way to get into the Rehabilitation Center in two days, I will have to try the only option remaining."

"The Rehabilitation Center!?" Jenna burst out. A misnomer if there ever was one. "Is that where Blake is?"

"I'm afraid so."

Something lodged in Jenna's throat. It took a few tries to get her voice past it. "Avon, in that case, there may not be...anyone...left worth going back for." She hated saying it, but she was a very practical woman.

Immediately, predictably, Cally objected. "We don't know that."

It seemed Vila was in agreement with the Auron. "That's right, and anyway, reconditioning didn't take on Blake the last time they tried it, at least not for long, and it never worked on me, and believe me, they tried, so we can't know..."

"We can't know anything if we stand here chattering," Avon cut in. "If you don't mind, I'm not looking forward to this. I'd prefer it to be over and done as soon as possible. Let's get on with it."

Jenna noticed how tired Avon looked. "Why don't you rest a while then, Avon? I'll help Cally set up in here." Why was she sounding concerned for the man? No, she really didn't know how to deal with this Avon, and that annoyed her.

Avon ignored the first part of her suggestion anyway. "Vila, help Jenna. Cally, I need answers from this man. Get them."

Silence followed, but Jenna glanced at the guard and saw his eyes widen, then reflect utter fright. She knew Cally was speaking into his mind, telling him she could rip out the information, but would prefer not to damage him unless he preferred otherwise. She could do

nothing of the sort, of course, but the ploy usually worked. Also, Avon would soon introduce him to the lie-detector capabilities of Orac. He'd talk.

* * *

On the flight deck, Vila was giving Avon some last-minute instructions on the use of lock-picking tools the computer expert was carefully tucking away into parts of the black uniform. Alternately, Avon was giving his own last minutes instructions to Orac.

"Seven minutes to teleport coordinates," Jenna warned, unsettled by the sight of Avon dressed like a Federation guard. The uniform brought forth the underlying air of menace Avon naturally carried, to the extent that made Jenna glad he was on their side. Theoretically. For the moment.

Cally, on the other hand, seemed all concern for the man. "How do you feel?" she asked. "Any discomfort?"

Avon flexed his fingers, then pulled on the gloves. "No. It feels slightly strange, that's all."

His hands had been reshaped by artificial implants that would be removed once it was all over, but with unexpected insight Jenna suspected that Avon was really talking about a sense of loss of identity. He was too acutely conscious and fiercely jealous of his individuality to ignore the slightest threat to it. That, she could sympathize with.

"Are you sure you won't take Orac with you?" Cally was asking. "It could be an immeasurable help down there."

All traces of sympathy in Jenna vanished. *Right, Cally. Do we want to offer him our lives' blood as well? Never mind we might have use of it ourselves.*

"Positive," Avon answered. "Too bulky. Besides, if something goes wrong, I'd rather it was safely here, coordinating my rescue." He turned to Jenna. "A pass in twenty four hours initially, then once every twelve hours."

"Right," she confirmed, hoping no more than one would be needed. ""What do we do with the guard?"

"Hold on to him. We'll worry about it later."

Avon put on the helmet as he left the flight deck, followed by Cally and Vila. "Good luck," Jenna called out after them.

* * *

The computer expert took his position at the teleport pad as Cally went to the console. *Avon, Her soft tones sounded inside his head, try not to abandon rational thought.*

"I never do," he snapped, indignant at the suggestion.

Normally. Don't let guilt lead you into something rash.

She couldn't know, but he was aware that she had sensed something amiss from the start. Avon noticed Vila looking from one to the other with a curious expression, and refrained from saying any more. He glared at Cally, realized he was wasting it from behind the mask, settled for an imposing stance and waited to be teleported down as soon as Jenna gave the word.

* * *

At the Security Complex, Avon found out that people were not inclined to look closely at the forbidding black-clad figures of the Federation guards. The anonymity of the uniform -- useful but disturbing; he wasn't accustomed to being ignored -- the palm prints, the guard's ID patch and the detailed information he had supplied all served to put the computer expert into one of the surveillance vaults of the Rehabilitation Center. For the time being, he could only make preparations. Getting Blake out would be best attempted as close to the Liberator's next pass as was safe.

Through the computer, Avon confirmed the rebel's location, checked the routines, noted the blind spots. Then he systematically started altering the programs, using Orac's presupplied instructions and the microcomponents he had brought for the task. When he completed the initial stage, the surveillance receptors were supplied with a remote override system. At the flip of a switch the monitors would start displaying bogus images until someone noticed prerecorded material was looping on itself. It should take an hour or two at least.

The alarms went off just as he was taking a breath to start the next stage.

He had his gun out and was about to run through the door when he realized the alert did not involve him, but a section of the cell block. He holstered the gun as an urgent call for medical assistance came over the loudspeakers. The cell number registered.

He could do nothing except watch on the screen as a medical team quickly responded to the call and disappeared into Blake's cell, followed by guards. He had no visual access to the inside of the cells, but he realized that someone else must. If he got back to the ship without Blake because of it, the young guard was going to live only long enough to regret withholding that information.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the cell door left open. A guard tumbled backwards out of it, then Avon got his first look at Blake in more than a week. He came through the door with a guard clinging to him, whom he shook off easily, sent a med-tech sprawling, and took off down the corridor.

Trust the man to make a hash of one's impeccably formulated plans! With a heartfelt curse, Avon reached for his gun again, on the point of rushing out to meet him, suspecting it was the most idiotic thing he could possibly do with the Liberator so far out of reach.

Don't let guilt lead you into something rash, Cally's warning echoed, bringing him to his senses. He restrained himself and watched. Blake didn't seem to be in any immediate danger. The guards stalking him were numerous now, but not one had reached for a weapon. They appeared intent on catching the man without causing harm. Blake, on the other hand, acted indifferent to his own welfare; he was damn near begging to be hurt. Avon saw that Blake's

right forearm was covered with blood, dripping profusely down his fingers. It was probably the loss of blood as much as the guards that slowed Blake enough to be overpowered and held down. A doctor rushed in and leaned over him. When Blake became visible again, there was a pressure pack strapped to his wrist. He was carried back into the cell, the furor died away.

Avon considered. Obviously, Blake was not being kept docile by drugs. Just as obviously, he hadn't been subjected to reconditioning again. That was a vast relief. However, there were other considerations. Instead of the usual prison garb, Blake had been wearing paper-analog coveralls, and nothing else, which had been shredded to pieces during the struggle with the guards. That, and the torn wrist which may have been the cause for the medical emergency -- had the bloody fool been making repeated attempts to kill himself?

And if he was already being protected from his own suicidal intentions, how had he inflicted that wound? If he had managed to get hold of a sharp object, someone as determined as Blake would have gone for the carotid artery in his neck. So what had he used to tear into his wrists? His teeth?

Avon suppressed a shudder and postponed worrying about Blake's sanity -- a relative thing anyway, under the best of circumstances. He went to work again. The various surveillance receptors and terminals of the complex were controlled by a central register. It was painstaking work to find inroads to it, but not impossible. He imposed a loop circuit on the cell-interior monitors as well, then installed a time-delay interruption switch on the building's electronic interference shielding. It would briefly interrupt a small portion of the shielding close to the roof. Anything more would set off alarms. He would have to get himself and Blake to the roof on time.

* * *

Avon located the remotely-situated maintenance crawlway leading to the air ducts that would eventually take them up to the roof. He freed the grille, then replaced it so it could be opened easily. When he judged the time to be right, he headed for the morgue to get one of the free-floating anti-grav carriers, euphemistically called 'collection carts'. People didn't look closely at dead bodies maneuvered through the corridors by the guards, especially in this place. Passing by a supply cabinet, he secured some large-sized clothes.

It was almost morning and the halls were empty. The loop tapes were already running on the surveillance monitors; Avon only had to worry about the patrols. If the guards stuck to schedule, there should be plenty of time. He knew the palm prints that had gotten him this far would be useless to gain entrance into an important prisoner's cell. He used Vila's tools to work on the door, the intricacy of the work making him doubly aware of the strangeness of his reshaped hands.

He remembered Blake dealing with the guards earlier and hoped he would have enough time to identify himself. He need not have worried. Blake was on the cot, unmoving even when the door opened. Avon quickly pulled the cart in, pushed the door until it closed, then went to shake the man awake, and realized Blake was not asleep, just disassociated.

"Blake?" No response. "Blake, it's me, Avon. Blake!"

The rebel gave a start, blinked, and his eyes tried to focus, looking like he was struggling to bring himself back from some faraway place. "A...Avon?"

He still looked lost, so Avon raised the face plate of his helmet briefly. "Yes, I'm here. The question is, are you?"

For another second Blake looked confused, then his eyes cleared. "Avon."

"We already established that. Now, pull yourself together and move. We have exactly twenty-eight minutes to get to the roof if we're not to miss the Liberator."

One thing about Blake, he acted when action was needed. He bounded off the cot. He appeared well except for the wide bandage on his wrist. "Get on the cart," Avon directed. "Now lie absolutely still until I say otherwise. Breathe as shallowly as you can." He covered the man completely with a sheet, giving thanks to the contraption that brought Blake's considerable weight down to nothing.

* * *

After one last look around, Avon freed the grille, yanked the sheet off Blake and motioned him into the crawlway, passing the man a teleport bracelet at the same time. "Veer to your left. You should come to a junction in about twenty meters. Wait there. I'll join you as soon as I get rid of this cart. Oh, yes." He grabbed the bundle of clothes off the cart to thrust into Blake's arms. "That flimsy thing is not going to survive the climb. Put these on if you don't want to materialize on the ship half-naked."

He parked the cart in an inconspicuous corner and hurried back. He crawled in, and spent some precious minutes tightening the grille from the inside using a magnetic driver, just in case search started prematurely. He followed Blake, only then noticing how narrow the tunnel was. Blake must have had one hell of a time squeezing through it.

The tunnel suddenly opened up to a junction, but the darkness steadily deepened. "We have to get to a parallel shaft," Avon directed, rising to his feet. "Follow the..."

Blake was not there.

Avon heaved an exasperated sigh which threatened to turn into sneezes in the dusty enclosure. Why couldn't the man once, just once, if for nothing but a blessed change, do as he had been told?

And where the hell was he?

There were only sixteen minutes left.

Avon spent one of them calming down and keeping his eyes closed, hoping to improve his vision. He opened his eyes, looking directly at the floor, and detected the disturbances in the layer of dust. Going in the wrong direction. Of course.

The ducts were high enough to stay upright, but not wide enough to dash through. Now there were outlets overhead, allowing some light in along the way; he could follow the trail. He

spotted Blake just around an old heating shaft, and lunged to grab the man's shoulder, dragging him back.

"That's the wrong way!" he hissed. "The roof, I said. In case you've never noticed, you usually go *up* to it." By pressing himself into some pipes he managed to shove Blake ahead of him, noticing the man hadn't bothered changing clothes. Well, that was his problem. "Hurry."

Blake let Avon push him along. His meek attitude was starting to bother the computer expert, but he couldn't spare it much thought at the moment. Nine minutes, twenty-three seconds, the luminous face of the chrono on his wrist informed him.

The first two gigantic overhead fans that they came to were in operation. The third was still. Avon clasped his hands in front of him to give Blake a lift up, gritting his teeth when the rebel's weight made him realize Orac had been too optimistic about the healing time of his hands. Blake wedged himself through the opening between two blades, then braced on one to reach for Avon. First he offered his right hand only to pull it back quickly and extend the other one. Avon jumped high enough to let Blake catch and pull him by the wrist. Six minutes, eighteen seconds.

A latticework of struts took them past three more levels. Four more left to the roof. Two minutes fifty-eight seconds. A horizontal shaft brought the two men directly under the portion of the roof that would be free of shielding in another minute. For no more than two minutes. A minute's grace period on each side of mark-zero before the auto-repair mended the breach.

Rungs were sunk into the walls. They used them to go up two more levels before Avon reached to tap Blake's ankle. "Stop at the next landing. We're high enough."

When he joined Blake on the metal ledge, his chrono was displaying two digit numbers. He leaned heavily into the rails lining one side, trying to catch his breath, slow the pace of his heart. In the light of the dawn spilling in from the mesh covering on the roof, he glanced at Blake. His head down, the rebel was still, except for his heaving chest, and he had slid his left hand through a tear in the coveralls to press against his ribs. Not that there was much covering left on his body. Well, Jenna might actually appreciate it, and Vila would be amused, while Cally would run around trying to cover their fearless leader's dignity.

Avon concluded he was lightheaded from the adrenalin drain, or he wouldn't be having such flighty thoughts. "We'll be..." he clamped down on the word 'home'. The dizzying relief wasn't going to make him *that* whimsical, "...on the ship soon."

Blake raised his head, and looked directly at Avon. "Yes, we will." Then he looked away again.

Something in his eyes, a too-gentle, almost tolerant expression, something Avon wasn't used to seeing -- at least not directed at himself -- and a slight ironic tone in the utterance...

Sheer instinct made him grab Blake's hand and yank it out of concealment. The folds of the coverall tore all too easily. Blake's wrist was bare.

"Where's your...." Avon glimpsed at the number -- single number -- displayed at his own wrist, knew there was no time. Eight...seven... "Damn you, why!" Six... He shoved Blake away, reached for his own bracelet, five... four....

Blake came at him, trying to restrain him. Three... Purposefully, Avon chopped down with the side of his hand directly on the bandage. Two... Blake gasped with pain, and jerked back. One...

Avon yanked off the bracelet. Almost immediately he felt the slight vibration against his fingertips that signaled teleport activation just as the chrono flashed zero. Perfect synchronization. For damn all.

The two men stared at each other, Blake cradling his hand, Avon gripping the rails because he didn't want his hands unrestrained at the moment. "Well, now that you've managed to throw away our best chance," he said, his voice incongruously calm, "would you mind telling me...?"

Now Blake sounded frantic. "It's not too late, Avon. They're still in range. Use the communicator. You can be gone before..."

"No, not until I know why." The rebel looked ready to come at him again. "Don't, Blake! Or one of us is going to have a long way to fall."

"Avon, please." And he was actually, sincerely pleading. "Get out while you still can."

"The idea was for both of us to get out."

"No."

Eyes locked, they stood still, at an impasse, until their contention became a moot point. Avon took a deep breath, and eased off the railing. "That's settled for the next twelve hours." He added at Blake's look, "The next rendezvous, if Jenna can manage yet one more miracle. We should be safe here for, oh, maybe another hour, but we must start thinking of getting out soon. For now," he pointed across the struts toward another shaft, "that way." The rebel didn't move. "Blake, I'm tired. Unless you want me on your lap -- and *I* don't want me on your lap -- we need more space."

Blake offered no more resistance. They found what seemed to be a used crane housing, almost directly under the landing pad on the roof. Avon sank down into a corner, pried off the helmet, and leaned back.

"You said something about an hour?" Blake prompted, sitting across from Avon, who tersely gave him a rundown on their situation. "So your cover is secure for now. You can simply walk out of the complex if you leave quickly."

Avon lifted his head. "Where will that leave you?"

"Since when have you started worrying about me? Do us both a favor and go away. I'd appreciate it if you'll leave me the gun, though."

"Are you trying to be funny, Blake? If you actually expect me to consider you and a gun simultaneously, try acting like you're marginally rational first."

"All right, keep the gun. Just go away."

"Forget it."

Blake's voice dropped down to that quietly intense level which Avon had come to resent automatically; it made him abandon all sense too often. "It's what you've always wanted. I'm out of your hair, and the Liberator is yours. Nobody can say you didn't try your best, not even the conscience you claim not to have. Don't you see, it's..."

Avon's temper snapped. He interrupted harshly. "What do you know of what I want?"

"You keep telling me."

"Yes, and you keep listening."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He pushed off the wall to rise to his knees, which let him look down at the large man. "Listen to this, Blake. You want to commit suicide, be my guest -- any other time. You can stand up, let them hunt you, trap you, torture you, kill you, anything your heart desires. But not this time. *Not this time.*"

"What's so special about this time?"

Avon wasn't ready for a confessional at the moment, but he found he couldn't keep meeting the too-penetrating eyes. He sat back on his heels, looked away. "I didn't go through all this trouble to indulge some self-sacrificial drivel, that's what. Especially when I don't understand why."

"You don't have to understand. Just accept that I won't be going back."

"Why not?" He felt like shaking the man. "I'm risking my life to get you out of this mess. There are three more people on the ship putting theirs on the line. The last person we expected opposition from is you. Come to your senses."

"You were late."

"Well, I'm sure we all humbly apologize, but it wasn't for want of trying, damn you!"

"Avon, you don't understand. That wasn't a reproach. I'm grateful. I'm even more grateful that you came in time to give me a choice, you have no idea how grateful. But now, just leave me. I promise you they won't get their hands on me again."

"Dammit, Blake, what's the matter with you? I was even prepared to find a mindless automaton, but you're undamaged..."

Something seemed to snap in Blake. "Undamaged? Undamaged!" He held out his bandaged arm.

"So? Whatever that is, it's obviously not crippling."

Now Blake was on his knees, leaning forward, intruding on the other man's personal space. "Would you like to see what it is, Avon? Would you?" He started tearing at the bandages with a violence that startled Avon.

"Blake, stop, you're going to hurt yourself." He reached a restraining hand only to have it swept away. "Don't, you'll start bleeding. Or get it infected. Blake, stop it!"

"No, you're going to look at it. Then maybe you'll leave me in peace."

'All right, all right, I'll look at it, but take it ea-"

The bandages came away at that moment and Avon's words caught in his throat. He stared at the metal housing and the intracath sunk into Blake's wrist over the major arteries, the sharp point of the spring-action needle glittering like a diamond chip on the edge of it. "Oh, hell," came out with the breath he expelled as if he had been punched in the stomach.

Blake didn't spare him. He touched the spring and the needle shot out to full extension. Instinctively, Avon flinched away, Blake gave a mocking laugh, bitter, then made the needle retreat. "Now you know. Give me the gun and go away."

Incapable of any response, Avon sat frozen, staring at the implant. Only when Blake reached for the gun did he snap out of immobility. He jerked back, remembered to breathe. "No."

"All right."

Suddenly he knew Blake was going to rip out the intracath to expose the artery, and he grabbed his hands. "Don't!"

"Avon, can't you understand?"

"No, I don't understand. They couldn't have modified you. You *know* me, dammit! A mutoid has no memories."

"Oh, that. Just a slight reversal of procedure. You see, they still wanted to know about the Liberator, so they didn't want to blank me yet. They performed the biological modification first."

Avon felt weak with relief, but didn't dare release Blake's hands. "Then it's all right."

"Nothing is all right. Do you seriously propose to take a vampire back to the Liberator?"

Blake attempted to shake off his grip, but Avon hung on stubbornly. He was steady now, felt capable of dealing with the situation. "Don't be so bloody dramatic. You're supposed to be an intelligent man, not a superstitious savage. Use the mind they left you. When we get back to the ship we'll see if the modification can be reversed. Until then, you can stop pitying

yourself and live with it." Blake had stopped struggling against his hold. Avon thought he was getting through to the man and carelessly loosened his hands. He was abruptly thrust away, hard enough to slam back into the wall, and he knew he should have seen it coming.

Blake jumped to his feet. "Don't patronize me, you smug bastard!"

He started to leave the enclosure, but Avon was the more agile of the two. He rolled and came to his feet in one continuous motion, straight into Blake's path, who looked ready to go through him. Avon's lips parted over his teeth in a predatory smile, anticipating the sheer physical confrontation that had never taken place between them but had been bound to arrive. Then sanity prevailed and he realized it was no place for a brawl, even if he weren't too tired to have an advantage over the large man. He erased the challenging expression off his face and stepped aside. As Blake passed him by, he softly uttered a single carefully calculated word, one Blake had never heard from him, and probably never would again.

"Please?"

It stopped Blake in his tracks.

Avon pressed his advantage. "Listen to me. If I believed they turned you into one of those monsters, I wouldn't bother handing you the gun. I'd kill you myself. I owe you that much. But it hasn't happened. There's no need for it. Be sensible, Blake, you know me. I'm not given to deluding myself -- or you. Isn't that what infuriates you most about me? Do you, for one minute, think I'd tell you pretty tales just to spare you?"

Blake's back was still turned, but he no longer seemed intent on leaving. "This is just like you," Avon continued. "Hell bent on a destructive course when you don't have all the facts, let alone giving them the proper consideration. For once in your life, while you still have one, will you stop and think?"

"All right, Avon," Blake said after a minute, "with a provision. If the condition cannot be reversed, you will not stand in my way." Now it was Avon's turn to be silently stubborn. Blake whirled on him. "I expect your word."

"Blake, as long as your mind wasn't modified, what difference does it make? It's only a biological change. Well, yes, your nutrition needs have changed, but if you strip away the superstition and the myth, what's the big difference between meat and blood? We can synthesize one as well as the other. If you think about it, it's actually no more than an already processed and concentrated form of..."

"It makes a difference to *me*!" Blake interrupted savagely. "Just because you've maneuvered me into listening to you, do not presume to make decisions on my life."

Look who's talking, Avon refrained from saying. It wasn't the time to push Blake too hard. He had to settle for temporary concessions for the moment.

"I'm still waiting," Blake prompted.

"All right, Blake, have it your way. Now can we give some thought to getting the hell out of here?"

"You," Blake approached, pointed directly at Avon's breastbone, "will simply walk out and get yourself somewhere you can safely wait. I'll find my own way out."

Avon tried to hold onto his temper. He truly did. "We're getting out together."

"No, and that's final."

The hold slipped. Avon abruptly placed his palms on the wide chest and pushed. It sent Blake staggering back into the enclosure, much to Avon's satisfaction.

"What is it with you, Blake? Do you think you'll be emasculated if you don't control anything and everything all the time?" Suddenly, his words reminded him of an aspect of mutoids. He stopped, fearing his tongue had run away with him again and he might have said something terribly wrong at the worst time. But Blake didn't react past the glare he had been directing at Avon for being shoved. That could mean the modification had not been radical. Or it could mean Blake was unaware of it. "You run my life often enough," he continued. "For once return the bloody favor."

Blake kept glaring at him resolutely. Avon shook his head. "All right. At least I'm rational enough to recognize an impossibility when I've been living with one. How do you feel about cooperation?"

Blake snorted. "I'll think about it when I can believe you're suggesting it seriously."

"For now. Don't presume too much."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He lowered himself to the floor. "I'll listen." He leaned back. "For now."

Had to add that, Avon thought, just had to echo me, didn't you? Never even a sliver of a quarter given. On either side. Maybe that was what kept them going. If a resolution ever became possible, whatever held them together would have no more reason to exist and might dissolve of anonymity.

As he sat down it occurred to Avon that, in that case, he was also doing his share to keep the status quo. To end the game there had to be a loser as well as a winner. Would it be so galling to let himself capitulate if the consolation prize was to be free of Blake? Somehow, he wasn't ready to concede the victory to the other man yet. Of course, one day Blake might go too far and Avon might be willing to pay any price to be free of him.

For now, though

"Presumably I can still move around for a little longer," he started. "Where did you leave the clothes and the teleport bracelet?"

"Inside one of those obsolete humidifier units in the shaft I took right off the first junction. There are only two of them there, and it's the second one."

"All right. I'll get those. There's a landing pad right over us. If I can get to a computer maybe I can arrange it so that we can openly take a patrol skimmer under the guise of a guard escorting a prisoner. Then there are the disposal chutes for refuse, and the conveyers out of the morgue. We need more information, though, and for that I need access to a terminal. One last thing, do you happen to know where they keep the serum?"

Blake looked nauseous, but answered equably. "In the medical section, I would assume."

"Well, I'll just have to see how far this uniform will take me. Now, is it too much to ask for you to sit here quietly and wait for me to return?"

"Until you return, no."

Avon rose. "In other words, you'll reserve your veto."

"Right."

"Depending on?"

"First, on whether you make it back or not."

"What an utterly charming thought."

"Second, on the options we might or might not have if you do make it back."

"Better and better," Avon said, just to have the last word.

He was almost out of the crane housing when he remembered the last time Blake had stood in the middle of the flight deck to solemnly promise to all concerned that he would pull out if the mission proved dangerous -- only to barge on anyway, managing to get Gan killed in the process. Blake always did as he damn well pleased, and wasn't above biding his time until he could get his own way. But Avon couldn't babysit right then, even if he were so inclined. If the man was that set on self-destruction, there was nothing to be done.

Or maybe there was. Avon paused briefly to turn, unclipping his gun. "Blake, here." He tossed the weapon, had the pleasure of seeing Blake's surprise and his fumbling to catch it, then left quickly. The rebel got him to dance to his tune often enough by granting the choice to Avon -- it would do him good to have a dose of his own medicine.

Blake stared at the gun that had been thrown at him so unexpectedly, shaking his head. Avon seemed to be learning by example. And that, he decided, could be dangerous. Not to mention uncomfortable. He put the weapon down and proceeded to wait. *It worked, Avon. This time.*

Avon returned sooner than Blake expected, even before the rebel had had a chance to worry or fidget. One look at the man's face and Blake started to worry anyway. He lowered the gun he'd picked up at the sounds and backed into the enclosure. "What's wrong?"

Whatever it was, it didn't seem to necessitate hurry. Avon followed, dropped the bundle of clothes, sank down and rested his forearms on his drawn-up knees. "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"All of it, if you please." His tone made it clear that what pleased Avon had better be what pleased Blake.

"Your absence has been noted."

It startled the rebel. The crawlways were remote but not soundproof. They had had to be quiet during the climb. Now they were far enough from the offices and under the landing pad which should drown out normal noises, but a full-scale alert should have been heard. "Why can't we hear the alarms?"

"There aren't any. From what I was able to hear, just a lot of very worried people waiting for Servalan's axe to fall, but no alarms and no search. And that's the best and the worst news, all in one."

Blake frowned in puzzlement, saw Avon regarding him as if he were a dull-witted child.

"Why do you suppose they aren't tearing this place up right now looking for you?"

Comprehension took only another second. "They must think I'm already out of their reach -- but, Avon, that means..."

"Exactly."

"...the Liberator must've been spotted," Blake finished unnecessarily.

"Congratulations. Yes, that's the most probable assumption. In fact, they must have spotted the ship then looked for you, or the alarms would have gone off anyway." With a deep breath, he rested his head against the wall. "I suppose it was bound to happen. We pushed the odds too many times, and the detector shield is not a foolproof system."

He had an apologetic tone. For a man who professed such arrogant regard for himself and his capabilities, Avon apologized for shortcomings all too often. It intrigued Blake as usual, but just at the moment he had more immediate concerns. "Damn! "

"You can say that again. We can no longer rely on the next rendezvous, or the Liberator at all."

"Is that all you can think of?"

"In a word, yes."

"Avon, they could be dead, or captured, or fighting for their lives right now."

"Don't make any mistake, Blake, so are we. I couldn't even leave the crawlways. They might not be conducting a search, but security is as tight as it gets. We have no way out of this trap."

He extended his legs, then slid forward to stretch out on the floor. "So, unless you have any brilliant suggestions, I'm going to rest."

"What!

"I've had perhaps ten hours of sleep in the last three days. On the purloined letter principle, this is as safe a place as it's likely to get for the time being. We might have to try to fight our way out. I'm tired and I'm going to rest while I can." With that he folded his arms on his chest and closed his eyes.

Blake stared at him for a long minute. "I do have one suggestion, Avon. We should separate."

"Why?"

"If they start a search, we'll be harder to find if we're apart."

One corner of Avon's mouth quirked. "You're a terrible liar, Blake. I don't know why the others cannot see through you." He condescended to part his eyelids slightly to peer at the rebel. "No, obviously I'm not worried. You should know something about my instincts for self-preservation by now. Consider that before you make a tiresomely noble gesture, then suit yourself. If you want to leave, I can't stop you. Although I'd prefer that you stayed and kept watch." He plainly thought that was the end of that and closed his eyes.

Why wasn't Avon worried? Blake was. He didn't know how long they had to stay in close confinement. Neither did he know what would happen when he got...what? Was 'hungry' still an applicable word?

They hadn't deprived him at all, forcing him to feed himself even though he would have preferred to starve. He knew mutoids indiscriminately fed on anything and everything available, except those they were programmed to obey. But he wasn't programmed in any way. Avon was obviously counting on that, or he wouldn't be lying within arm's reach, going to sleep.

Blake picked up the clothes. He had no idea if it was psychological or a fact of his altered constitution, but he was always cold since the operation, and the metal floor he was sitting on wasn't helping any. Before he got any farther, though, it occurred to him that the floor was also hard. Deciding he was already used to being cold, and doubting the clothes would make all that much of a difference anyway, he shifted to slide the bundle under Avon's head.

Avon was still awake, but didn't give a start at Blake's approach, didn't even bother to open his eyes. He took the bundle by feel and placed it himself. Blake sat back, gnawing on his knuckles abstractedly, hoping the implied faith was justified. As long as his mind was his own, why shouldn't it be? Still, he pulled the gun closer to himself.

With the extra guarantee, he went back to worrying about the Liberator. "I hope they're all right."

He only realized he'd spoken aloud when Avon said, "Worrying about it isn't going to help, and I can't say wishing is going to be a lot more productive."

"No, but if they are captured, we might be at the right place to be of help."

"You're a fool, Blake. If you're going to hope for anything, hope that they either got clean away or were destroyed totally."

Blake stared at the motionless form incredulously. "And why is that?"

"If they are taken alive Servalan will soon know where we are."

That was nothing Blake wished to hear. "You know, Avon, I don't like you very much."

"Don't let it bother you, Blake. The feeling is more than mutual. Now, if you must worry, do it quietly. I do need to rest."

Blake couldn't leave it alone. "What do you hope for then? Irony, isn't it? Without the Liberator, I won't last long, but then you can't have the ship anyway."

Avon didn't respond, but Blake suddenly knew that, if the dark eyes were open, he'd see that shuttered look drop into place. He was left with a mere feeling of having had the last word. Somehow, it was a hollow one.

* * *

"You shouldn't have turned, told you shouldn't have turned, should've kept going," Vila said for maybe the tenth time as the ship lurched violently again. If Jenna had had a hand free she would have cheerfully strangled the man. They may have had a better chance on their original course, would have certainly been in deep space by now, but she hadn't been about to reveal the route that had put them into Earth orbit successfully three times. If they got out of this in one piece, she wanted to be able to use those coordinates again. It was the only way they could, with luck, find their shipmates.

Four more pursuit ships appeared out of nowhere, bringing the number up to...she had lost track. The only consolation was that the enemy ships were getting so thick that now they were a little shy about firing, afraid of hitting one of their own, especially after one of Jenna's maneuvers which had trapped two pursuit ships in crossfire.

The ship rocked again. And again. Vila was whining in the background. Again. Zen reported on the damage and the energy levels. Cally was scolding Vila, saying he could have gotten one of the enemy ships if he hadn't been so busy complaining.

"No," Jenna interrupted as she sent the ship into a spiral and out of the way of another plasma bolt, "we can't afford to fire anymore. Zen, divert power from the neutron blasters to ... oh, hell, to whatever needs it most."

As the spiral tightened, she rolled the ship once, and came out of it with the forward thrusters abruptly cut off and all power fed into reverse. The ship protested mightily, the groan of the pylons clearly audible even on the flight deck, the gravity stabilizers fluctuating.

"You're tearing it apart!" Vila screamed.

"Be quiet, Vila." Cally still sounded calm.

The pursuit ships, in a dive to follow the Liberator, couldn't pull up in time and shot past. Jenna took advantage of the breathing space. "Orac, those prefigurations I asked for, now."

Schematic upon schematic of options flashed on the screen, too fast for any of them but Jenna to comprehend the intricacies of individual maneuvers. But nobody could miss that in each case the large blue circle representing the Liberator broke into fragments.

"We're dead!" The wail came from Vila, predictably.

"Not yet," Jenna said stubbornly. "Clear the screen, Orac. Zen, scanner sweep, three-sixty orbital." After a check of their present situation, she sent the ship into a high arc, at the top of which she switched to the forward thrusters again so they were once more facing where they were going. That might give the pursuit ship pilots a pause of sheer disbelief.

"Are you out of your mind? Now we're heading back to Earth. Cally, she's heading back to Earth!"

"It's all right, Vila. Jenna knows what she's doing.,"

The pilot disassociated herself from the background chatter. The asteroid belt was ahead and below. Her concentration up to this point would be nothing compared to what was going to be required of her in another ten seconds. "Zen, seal in the flight deck. Cut off all auxiliary systems, including auto-repair on everything except scanners and engines. Priority one: mobility, two: visibility, three: forcewall. Drop the forcewall if you have to." Six more seconds, and with a downward swoop she sent the Liberator diving into the asteroid belt. Now let them try and follow. She hadn't spent most of her life running blockades for nothing. Of course, she had also learned that in a high stakes gamble one had to be prepared, in advance, to lose.

* * *

Avon woke up to silence. There was no traffic on the landing pad. The whole place had to be holding its breath, waiting for Servalan's arrival from headquarters. Quietly, he turned his head to check on Blake. In one corner, his brow furrowed in concentration, absentmindedly worrying his fingernails, the rebel was drawing something on the dusty floor. His intense expression made him look like an oversized, rather slow but determined-to-be industrious child. Impatiently, Avon banished the image. There was nothing childlike about Blake, except maybe his habit of chewing his nails, fingers, and knuckles.

Huddled, Blake took the hand away from his mouth, and used it to rub one arm up and down. Avon got the impression that Blake was cold. He lifted his head from the bundle of clothes, wondering why the damn fool had parted with them if he were uncomfortable. Avon didn't like generous gestures. He tended to resent them, in fact. They seemed to require a response.

The movement drew Blake's attention. He opened his mouth, thought better of it with an upwards glance, and motioned the computer expert closer. Avon looked at the diagram on the floor, his head almost touching the curly one. "What is it?"

"A very old sewer system," Blake whispered back. "We used it once, to break into this place. I think I remember it correctly."

Avon refrained from pointing out he wasn't happy about trusting Blake's memory. "If they didn't block it since then," he said instead. Blake shrugged, indicating it was a chance they had to take. "Where does it lead?"

"To the city."

"Oh, marvelous. How do you expect to stay hidden there, with a monitor every few meters, and guards thicker than that?"

"The Epsilon quarter."

"No!" The objection came out with more force than was seemly, and he had to hurry up and find practical reasons when Blake looked at him questioningly. "People who don't belong there won't live long, you know that. At the very least, someone will figure we're worth selling to somebody."

That was true enough. The Epsilon section had been built to serve the very basic needs of...cattle, there being no other way to think of the dregs of humanity crammed into it: one big communal sty. At least, that had been the intention. In reality, since nobody had thought the barely-intelligent creatures clawing for existence there needed much monitoring, and the patrols studiously avoided the dark, damp holes with their foul stench and slime, the criminal element had found fertile ground and flourished unchecked. There was no vice that couldn't be had in the Epsilon quarter, nothing that couldn't be bought, if one was desperate enough to risk his life.

As Avon had been once, for two visas. But that memory didn't deter him. Had he been alone, he would have taken the chance again. He could blend in; Blake couldn't. They were both overtly, innately Alpha, but Avon could restrain his sensibilities if he had to. Blake not only couldn't restrain them, he wouldn't restrain them. And as he was now, he'd be in double jeopardy.

To keep the other man from prying, Avon went on the offensive. "Also, while you were hatching this brilliant escape, did you bother to think I'm the one wearing the uniform of a guard? Imagine the welcome I'll get. Or is this your way of getting rid of me without dirtying your own hands?"

Blake looked wounded and offended at the same time. "I assumed you were wearing something else under all that."

"Well, you assumed wrong, as usual." And now he couldn't so much as undo a snap on the miserable uniform. "Besides, I have no intention of letting you drag me anywhere near the domes. Some of us still dehydrate. I brought nutra-tabs from the ship, but I need water, and not the drugged kind."

"My apologies for being thoughtless," Blake got from between clenched teeth. "What brilliant solutions do you offer?"

Avon congratulated himself. He had sidestepped the issue without having to say that one glimpse of Blake's implant, and the man would have been torn to pieces in the Epsilon quarter. Mutoids weren't welcome anywhere, least of all where fear and hate ran rampant alongside violence. Trust Blake not to consider that. "How old are these sewers, do you know?"

"Not exactly, no."

"Outdating the domes?"

"By many centuries, easily."

"If they existed before conversion technology, they probably outlet into the river. Let's hope so anyway. After this trip, I think we'll be in desperate need of cleansing. Get dressed and let's get out of here. I'm starting to feel like a rat trapped in a maze."

The rebel obliterated the diagram, rose, tore off the remnants of the coverall and dressed. Avon noted that Blake had no operation scars, no alterations visible except the implant, which may or may not mean anything, depending on how conscientious the surgeons were ordered to be. Another thing he noted was the slow, careful movements and how heavily the man sat down to pull on the boots.

He hesitated, then decided to plunge right into it. "How often do you need transfusions?" he whispered.

For a long moment he thought he wasn't going to get an answer, then Blake spoke. "How often do I *need* them? I don't know."

"What kind of a schedule did they have you on?"

"Once every eight hours."

"And the last time?"

"Last night."

"So you've missed one already. How do you feel?"

"Fine. "

"Don't give me that, Blake! I have eyes. This is no time for your tedious invulnerable hero pose. We can only deal with it if you..."

"And how the hell do you expect me to answer?" Blake interrupted, a tight edge to his whisper. "How do I feel? I don't bloody know. I woke up five days ago in a recovery chamber, and since then I've been a stranger in my own body. I don't recognize its signals anymore. I don't even know what terms still apply to describe its sensations even when they do feel somewhat familiar. I've been cold constantly, but for all I know that could indicate I was in the pink of health. Don't you understand? I have no orientation point, not for this." He cast Avon a sideways glance. "No, obviously you can't, not while you're still human, at least

as human as you get, so why don't you just leave me alone? I promise to let you know if I'm on the verge of jeopardizing your precious skin. Until then, leave me be." He turned, finished pulling on the boots, then rose, heading out. "Coming?"

Avon followed. Wordlessly.

It took them hours to figure out which portion of the construction might offer access to the ancient sewer system. Neither was an architect, and all they had to rely on was Blake's certainty that there had to be a way, sometime, somewhere. The rebel was astounded Avon was going along, minus acerbic comments. Minus any kind of comments, for that matter. At first he assumed the man was waiting for a beauty of a screw-up to let loose with righteous justification. When Avon let opportunity after opportunity go past after wrong turns and backtracking, Blake decided he was just sulking. Only slowly did he realize he had been granted just what he had asked for: he was being left alone.

He should have been careful with that wish. He was lightheaded, numbness was creeping into his extremities, and each step required more and more concentration. And somewhere in the background was the distracting, annoying absence of the sense of hunger his conditioned sensibilities insisted he should experience. He gritted his teeth, determined to ignore it all until he stumbled and fell.

Dropping out of an access hatch, he couldn't control his landing, did stumble, but didn't fall. Avon steadied him, then let go immediately as if he wished to disassociate himself from the impulse. Instinctively, Blake reached to hold him by the arm, only then identifying what was bothering him as guilt.

"Avon, wait." The stiffening under his fingers warned him to let go and he did, but rushed to get his piece off his chest. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for and totally unfair. There is no excuse for it, and I do apologize."

He was studied briefly, the expression in the dark eyes still remote, then Avon walked away, without any indication of accepting or rejecting the apology. Blake followed, resigned to the fact that with Avon it was never that easy.

They came to a junction where the metal walls gave way to stone, acquired a downward slope, and eventually terminated where the roof had fallen in.

Avon studied the obstruction. "Do we clear it?"

At least Avon was speaking to him again. Blake nodded. "Yes. This should be the way."

Tumbling away some of the rocks revealed an intact passageway on the other side, unexpectedly bright. Blake blinked in surprise, then realized the light came from a natural source: phosphorous lichen. "Well, at least we're getting close to some sort of moisture," Avon commented. They started to clear a space to climb through.

"You're right, you know," Avon said, in a casually conversational tone. "Intellectually, I have a better perspective and I can be impartial. But I can't possibly know what it's like to live with it. I'll keep that in mind."

"Thank you," Blake mumbled, at more of a loss with a benevolent-sounding Avon than he would have been with a difficult one.

The next time Avon spoke they were over the obstruction. "You do realize that there might be advantages to pooling resources and all available data, don't you?" He walked off, abruptly enough to discourage an answer.

The rebel shook his head. Who but Avon would choose such an obscure way to ask: can I help? It was just as well, though. Blake wasn't sure he was ready to let him.

The passageway led to an arched enclosure with crumbling foundation pillars, fortified by newer materials. Suddenly the fragmented recollections connected and Blake knew exactly where he was. "This way." He preceded Avon until they came to a row of rusty metal coverings on the ground.

Most of them were sealed into place by centuries of disuse. One, probably the one the rebels had used, took concentrated effort -- which was fast getting beyond Blake -- but came loose. He caught his breath, let it out again in a hurry, and contemplated not breathing again. At least nothing seemed to be wrong with his olfactory sense, although he no longer seemed to have a gag reflex. He glanced at Avon, who actually smiled at him wickedly and slid the face plate of the helmet down. Of course, the filter units. Blake felt distinctly envious as he lowered himself into the hole. Avon joined him, then they reached to slide the cover back into place.

Now it was dark again. Trying not to cringe, Blake touched the wall to guide himself, remembering that Avon -- damn him -- also had gloves. He toyed with the idea of not offering the man his hand, knowing Avon would never take it on his own, and letting him follow by sound alone, then decided not to be petty and reached back.

"At least it has dried up," he consoled himself, starting off with Avon in tow.

"Let's hope you'll find a place that hasn't. Or we can assume it no longer connects with the river."

Reminded anew of his purpose, Blake pushed up, trying to judge which point would be best to turn away from the city toward open land, hoping he had enough energy to get there.

* * *

The sewers did connect to the river, in quite a few places. Once they realized that, they ran alongside the river that followed the tunnels, figuring it was best to emerge as far from the complex as possible. At one point, the ancient structure had crumbled badly enough to impede progress and they had to get out.

Grimacing, Avon studied the murky water lapping at their feet. There was a sudden drop into it, no telling how deep. In less than a meter the side tunnel terminated, but the exit was barred. There had once been a mesh across the bars as well, but only bits of that remained. Behind it, through the narrow opening over the water, the surface of the river was visible under dusk light.

Experimentally, Avon checked the incline. It was a slick, steep surface, affording no way to keep his footing. He held out his hand to use Blake as an anchor. The rebel first found a niche in the rocks to wedge himself in place, then complied. It told Avon he no longer trusted his strength. Actually, he had thought Blake would exhaust himself long before now. However, it seemed the man hit a certain plateau and stayed there, functioning laboriously but steadily from then on.

Avon lowered himself in the water. At full extension he could reach the bars. They weren't all that firmly embedded, but it would still take time and effort to pry them loose. They felt looser lower down and he thought there might be a better way. The river had a strong enough current to have eroded the bottom considerably. The question was, how far? it took Avon a while to persuade himself to find out. The sewers hadn't been used for centuries and right here, unlike the stagnant pools they had had to slosh through along the way, the moving water had since cleansed the area, but the overwhelming revulsion at the idea of putting his head into it was instinctive. He finally ordered himself to get on with it, and tugged for Blake to release his hand. He couldn't get loose, and glanced back. Eyes screwed shut, the rebel had concentrated all his efforts on the anchoring hold.

"Let go, Blake. I'm going to check something out." It took a few seconds for the man to comprehend, and a few more to loosen his grip, as though the brain impulses reached the muscles only sluggishly. "Are you all right?" Avon asked, knowing it was an absurd question, also knowing the answer even before it was uttered.

"Yes, of course."

That was bravado, but Blake had promised to let him know if the situation got beyond his ability to handle. Avon paid attention to his task.

There was a large enough opening at the bottom. Avon surfaced and climbed up. The helmet that had been useful earlier was now a hindrance. He attached it to a belt loop.

"There's plenty of space down there. We can just swim out." Blake was staring at the water uneasily. "Don't worry, it's not that bad. In fact, it's cleaner than anything else we've been in today. You can even see reasonably well." Blake didn't look reassured. "You do swim, don't you?"

"I'll manage."

Oh. Avon took off his belt, hooked it through one loop and fastened it to form a circle hanging off his waist. He made sure the buckle was on the outside so it wouldn't catch on the loop. Now, if necessary, he could unsnap it and it would slip away, leaving him free. "Hold onto that. I'll lead. Come on, Blake, while it's still light.

"It won't take long, but don't surface too soon," he warned before they went under. "Let me check what's out there first."

Blake contributed more than impeded and it wasn't difficult. Once past the bars, Avon turned to the bank and stood up as soon as he could. The area was deserted, mostly flat, except for some outcroppings further upstream. He tugged on the belt to let Blake know it was safe to

come up, and waited long enough to see his head break water.' "There, under cover," he said, pointing, starting that way as soon as his belt was released. He had never particularly cared for large bodies of water, and the uniform was getting unbearably heavy against the current, even in the shallows.

As he was climbing out he glanced around and found himself alone. He turned quickly, at first seeing only the unbroken surface of the water, then spotted Blake, further downstream than where they had surfaced, going with the current.

He called out, was back in the water without waiting to see if he would get a reaction. Why did the damned idiot let go if he had been on the verge of collapse? It seemed to take interminably long to cover the distance between them. Unceremoniously, he got his fingers firmly into the sodden curls as soon as he could reach that far and pulled toward the bank. Once there, he braced, hauled Blake up by the arms, rolling him onto his stomach, only partially out of the water.

After a minute it was clear that Blake hadn't swallowed water. And he was breathing, however shallow. He just seemed to be...out. He was also pale and cold enough for alarm.

Feeling helpless, Avon looked around. Night wasn't coming for a while yet and he felt exposed in the open. Any skimmer could spot them, but there was no way he could carry Blake to the overhang. With a heartfelt sigh, he rolled Blake's body back into the water, wading out with it. When the water reached his waist, he trudged upstream, holding Blake securely at his side.

Getting the man's waterlogged weight under the ledge almost defied Avon, but he finally managed it. He took off the uniform top and placed it under Blake's head. His wet black shirt underneath clung to him unpleasantly. He tried to rouse the rebel. Calling his name, shaking, and careful slaps failed to elicit any response. Frustrated, he gave up, sat back, gathered his knees with his arms and glared at the unconscious man, feeling distinctly hostile. "Damn you, Blake, what am I supposed to do with you now?"

Silly question. He knew what he was supposed to do. He just didn't know if he wanted to do it. No, he even knew that, but not wanting to do things had been pretty much irrelevant for the past week. In fact, it had been irrelevant for damn near two years, ever since he had been unfortunate enough to draw the attention of this self-appointed, latter-day messiah of the masses.

Mentally, he checked himself out. He was weary and he ached, yes, but that was just the result of exertion. Nothing some rest wouldn't take care of. He knew he still had a store of energy to draw from; he had always been able to keep going long after others had to quit, often out of sheer tenacity. The nutra-tabs had all the necessary nutrients, if not the volume, and now water was plentiful. He was all right. Blake, on the other hand...

Taking a deep breath, he rose. "This is all your fault," he informed the insensible figure. "But just to keep the record straight, I'm not doing this for you anyway. I'm doing it because I made a stupid mistake."

He went to kneel by the river. He washed his hands and forearms, using a sandy portion of the soil to scrub with. It wasn't the best cleaning process, but it was all that was available.

Blake hadn't stirred by the time he returned. He picked up the gun. Throwing some twigs together, he aimed a minute charge at them until they caught fire. He pulled one out, burning at the end, took a firm hold of Blake's wrist, keeping the hand bent back out of the way, released the needle and carefully held it to the tiny flame.

The next step was awkward. It took more tries than he cared to think of to insert the needle properly. From then on it became simpler. The suction mechanism was automatic and all he had to do was to keep steady.

He closed his eyes, telling his suddenly-too-active imagination to be sensible, that it really didn't feel like he was being drained, that a human body could part with quite a bit of blood without undue harm, that it was a regenerating commodity, that...

A moan from Blake brought him out of himself. He gripped the wrist tighter, braced to forestall any sudden moves. Yes, the rebel was definitely waking up.

"Blake, don't move. Don't move. Don't move." He kept repeating it so it would reach the man before any other impulse as he regained his senses.

It worked. "Avon, what...? " Obediently, he hadn't so much as moved a muscle.

"It's all right. Just stay still. You can open your eyes if you want to, but remember, any move you make is likely to hurt me a hell of a lot more than it'll hurt you."

Blake's eyes first found Avon's, dropped to their hands, stayed blank for an instant, then widened in comprehension. "Don't!" Avon shouted, feeling the muscles under his hand tense. They stayed tense, but now he could tell the effort was directed against the impulse to jerk away.

"No, Avon, don't....

"Sssh.

"Don't, please, don't. Dammit, Avon, stop!"

"It's all right. It's drawing slowly. I'm fine so far. Just don't move."

Blake's free hand came up weakly, as if to push Avon away, then fell back without touching. His breath was coming in short gasps, catching in his throat.

"Are you all right?" Avon inquired.

"Avon, stop it, please. I hate this."

He spoke evenly to counter Blake's distress. "Well, I can't say I'm having the time of my life, either, but it must be easier than lugging your impossible weight around. However, while we're on the subject, how do you stop it?" That had to be automatic as well, but he didn't

know for sure. He didn't want to chance pulling away, in case the needle drew air into Blake's artery.

"It's...automatic."

"I thought so. And just how much do you normally draw?" The rebel tossed his head, agitated. "Blake, think. I need to know. You must have seen the containers. How much did they hold? Blake, answer me!"

"It said ... point seven five liters on them."

"Okay. I can handle that, so just relax. Come on, Blake, there's nothing to do until it's over, so relax."

Blake had turned his face to one side and covered it with his free arm. He was still breathing strangely. It took Avon a moment to put that together with the shuddering motions of the chest the man was trying desperately to control. He could understand how impotent and humiliated Blake had to be feeling at the moment, but he wouldn't thank Avon for noticing. He turned away as much as their contact would permit to give the rebel some privacy.

Eventually, the pulling sensation at his wrist stopped. Carefully, he disengaged himself and Blake withdrew his hand immediately. Avon put pressure on the tiny puncture with his thumb and climbed to his feet. Although he hadn't felt undue discomfort during the procedure, he was dizzy and slightly queasy as soon as he got up. Stubbornly, he kept from swaying and took himself to the river to clean up some more.

After a while, Blake joined him, started washing up as best as he could, then found a stick to scrape at his boots. It was some time before he broke the terse silence. "Don't ever do that to me again."

Avon hadn't expected a thank you. After all, he wouldn't have thanked someone himself for doing something he hadn't asked for. But this was a bit too much. "Look, I realize you feel put upon..."

"Put upon? Your words lack impact."

"All right, you have all the natural symptoms of being victimized: you're angry, you're guilty, you feel helpless and you want to strike out. But don't take it out on me, Blake..." It dawned on him that, in a way, he deserved it. "...just because I happen to be on hand," he finished lamely.

Blake wouldn't look at him, kept scraping at the boots "Thank you...I think," he mumbled finally.

"You're welcome...I think."

Another minute passed.

"We will not keep doing this, however," Blake said, firmly.

"We will do what is necessary," Avon responded just as assertively.

They glared at each other, neither willing to back down, and simultaneously decided to postpone the confrontation. For the time being. They both gave their attention to cleaning up. Avon was becoming more and more aware of a stinging sensation traveling up his forearms. His skin felt slightly hot and perhaps a little swollen. He must have gotten a bit too enthusiastic while scrubbing. He shrugged to himself and plunged his hands up to the elbow into the water.

"You could've saved me a lot of trouble by telling me you felt bad enough to pass out," he said for future reference. "What did you think, I wouldn't notice? Or did you assume I'd just walk away and leave you?"

"It seems I don't always assume wrong," Blake said pointedly. He continued before Avon could figure out what he was referring to. "But no, I didn't assume that. I didn't have any warning. I wasn't getting any weaker. It just happened suddenly."

"I see. So your system functions at diminished capacity for about twenty-four hours, then the energy drains at once."

"It depends, I suspect. I think I can go a lot longer than that if I'm not exerting myself."

It was definitely getting dark, and the wind was coming up, making it an effort for Avon not to shiver. "It's going to be a long night."

Blake was studying the area. "We're outside the dome, close to water. Scattered along these paths should be hidden survival packs. Can't be hard to locate one."

"Surv...why?"

"For the deserters from the city."

"Ah. To make sure they live long enough to swell the ranks of resistance, so they can go ahead and die in the name of the cause. One of your ideas, was it?" Blake didn't answer. Avon got to his feet, trying not to think of how little he relished another hike. "What should I look out for?"

"I'll go. You need to rest, and I can locate them more readily."

"Not that long ago you were out. If there's a survival pack to be had, I'd like to make sure it got to me."

"It will. The energy seems to come back as fast as it drains; I'm fit."

That made sense, actually. With a relief he wouldn't admit to under torture, Avon shrugged impartially. "Very well."

Blake followed him to the overhang. "Who keeps the gun?"

"Take it."

"I wouldn't want to leave you without a weapon."

Avon sat down to pull off one of the boots. From between it and the pants a handgun slipped out. "Did you think I'd have only one?"

"No, especially not after you left it with me, but I didn't want to, uh, make the wrong assumption again."

Suddenly Avon caught on. He glanced down at his shirt revealed by the removal of the jacket. "Okay, I got the point. Now can we drop it?" he bristled.

Blake didn't belabor the issue. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

* * *

It was no use. Jenna couldn't focus anymore, and her brain felt so fuzzy that, if she continued, she was going to connect something wrong. Besides, her hands were shaking with fatigue.

She rose from behind the navigation console and instantly had to lean into it. She realized Cally was on the flight deck when the Auron's supporting arms came around her.

"It is enough, Jenna. The ship needs to recover, and so do you."

She offered a token protest as she was led to the couch. "We missed one rendezvous already."

"And there's nothing that can be done about it. Rest."

Jenna stretched out on the couch, but couldn't shut off. "How bad is it out there?"

"We have life support on this deck only. The hull was breached in more places than I can count. Those areas are sealed and inaccessible. I told Zen to leave them alone and concentrate on the essentials."

"The teleport. How's the teleport?"

"In surprisingly good condition. I think Zen has a priority programming to keep that section safe."

"Good."

"You sleep now. I'll see if I can fix the communications console."

"Never mind that," Jenna objected, her eyes closing of their own volition. "Orac can take its place. See what you can do with the astro-navigation system. Where's Vila?"

"He's donned a life support suit and went to see where he can give Zen some assistance."

"Heaven help us all."

"Don't be ungenerous, Jenna," Cally reproached. "He's got very clever hands, and he's doing his best."

"Well, I suppose I should be grateful he's not somewhere drinking himself into a stupor," Jenna mumbled. Sleep was coming whether she wanted it or not. She fought it a little longer. "Cally, we must...send a message...somehow."

"We're too far away."

"Check with Orac."

"All right, I will. Sleep now."

She didn't seem to have much choice.

* * *

There were hands on him and they weren't his. Avon snapped out of sleep ready to fight, only to find Blake tucking a blanket around him. "It's only me," the rebel assured hastily.

"You underestimate yourself," Avon snarled, furious with himself for falling asleep despite all intentions to the contrary. Sleep was an elusive thing for him under the best of circumstances and this was a most perverse time for a change.

"I found a survival pack."

"Needless to say." Avon sat up to yank the blanket away and wrap it around himself. "Must we use the light?" It didn't exactly put out a burst of illumination, but it was enough to make Avon peer uneasily at the darkness behind it.

"I didn't want to trip over you." Blake turned it off. "As long as you're awake, do you want something to eat? Field rations, I'm afraid."

"I don't see how I have much choice. Anything with bulk." Nutra-tabs were fine, but his body might need more to replace the blood, and the gnawing in his stomach was distracting. He heard the popping sound of a cover being removed, then a container was placed in his hand along with a spoon. Mostly by feel he got some into his mouth, instantly deciding that it was just as well he didn't have to see it.

Blake had withdrawn to a corner, a darker shadow in the dark, quiet. Avon saw a flash of white about his wrist and realized he had found something to wrap around the implant, wondered if it was simply to conceal it. He forced himself to finish the tasteless lumps of whatever, then thought of something. "Blake?"

"Yes?"

"Can you eat? At all?"

"I don't know. I expect not. I know I have no desire to do so."

"Try. "

A long pause. "Why?"

"Indulge me." He could just make out Blake's groping in what seemed to be a backpack. Then the man sat back, motionless. "Well?"

"There's...I feel a resistance. No, more like revulsion."

"With the offerings on hand, no wonder. Try it anyway."

"Is there a point to this, Avon?"

"There might be."

"All right." It was more a sigh than an utterance. His hand went to his mouth and stayed there, as if he had to keep the food in by force. "This isn't fun, Avon." His voice was muffled. "Suppose you tell me why."

"There should be two ways to perform a biological modification, apart from genetic manipulation which doesn't apply. Radical surgery, or reconditioning. I'm trying to figure out which one they used on you. If the latter, the suppressants and the like were probably in the plasma. They could be working out of your system."

"I can't," Blake said after a while. "It's nauseating." He spat.

Avon detected a note of dismay. It might mean nothing. The suppressants might still be in effect. "Can you swallow?"

"Swallow what?"

"In general. Your saliva glands are working, aren't they?"

"Yes, but instead of the food getting moist, it, was drying my mouth. I'd have choked if I tried swallowing."

The saliva glands were working just enough to moisten the mouth then. Avon could tell the whole thing was annoying Blake. "I trust the research is over," the man said as if in confirmation.

Avon pushed a little more. "Something easier then. You can try swallowing some water."

"I can, but I don't care to."

It was a definite warning to drop the subject. In such cases, it took real aggravation to make Blake conform. Avon supplied it. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you had taken to cowering."

"Maybe I don't have the stomach for it anymore," Blake snapped, self-depreciatingly.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

There was a flurry of motion as Blake dug into the backpack, raised a container to his mouth, and lowered it. Then he made a strangled sound, spewed out the water and doubled over.

Moving totally on impulse, Avon got to his knees to hold the man's shoulders as he retched. Shortly, Blake collected himself to push him away. "Satisfied?"

As a matter of fact, he was. There was a muscle in there, contracting, probably the same one that customarily kept the food from coming up the esophagus. Contracting at the wrong time, but it was *there*. "Believe it or not, I'm not trying to cause you discomfort. I'm attempting to figure out what was done to your insides."

"And when you do find out, what do you propose to do about it?"

Avon couldn't answer that. There was nothing to be done here and now. Why he needed to know despite that was an even tougher question. "I thought *you'd* care to know," he said before it could be raised. "Fine. If you have objections, we'll forget it." He backed into his corner, rewrapping the blanket tightly around himself.

"Why should I object to being a specimen? I should be used to it by now," Blake kept harping. "Any other aspect of my bodily functions I can enlighten you about?"

Avon opened his mouth to put a stop to the tirade with a particularly nasty retort, and closed it without a sound. Maybe Blake was desperate to know himself, but asking in any way except under guise of protest might be admitting a need for help. Something to be avoided, Avon could understand. He kept quiet and allowed the man to ask in his own way.

"Let's see what I can tell you. Oh yes, I don't seem to have much use for sleep. I don't get hungry, at least in the normal sense, whatever normal means now. Contrary to your opinion, I still sweat, and the rest of the elimination systems works too, although don't ask me why."

"It would have to, albeit less," Avon supplied informatively, wondering where his sudden supply of patience had come from. "Your blood still carries by-products from various organs as waste, and blood cells themselves die regularly. Bone marrow rectifies that by producing more, but yours probably doesn't anymore. Thus the transfusions. Or rather, for the transfusions, to leave room for the extra blood. When you passed out, it may have been shock brought on by acute anemia."

He felt pedantic and patronizing. Anybody who had had basic biology ought to know all that. Surely Blake did too, but the man, silent and still in the shadows, gave the impression of listening avidly. So Avon continued, "You don't need much sleep because your body has a larger supply of energy. You no longer use any of it on the digestive process or the energy production itself. Also, your nervous system must be more active now. For example, digesting certain substances prompt bile production, and you still need that or waste systems will shut down. When you lack natural stimulants, the nervous system will take over and stimulate it. Those are no more than alterations on existing systems, nothing radical."

"What would be the radical alterations?" Caught up in the subject, Blake had apparently forgotten to keep up his hostile pose.

"The digestive organs and glands, of course. Probably the adrenal gland as well." From what he knew of mutoids, they did the most violent things with utter calm.

"And?"

Enough, Avon decided. "End of speculation. I trust you realize it is all speculation. "

"Don't evade, Avon," Blake insisted. "I may not be informed, but I've heard enough insults hurled at mutoids."

So it was going to be unavoidable. "Well, yes, I also heard the..." he searched for as innocuous a word as possible, "'neuter' comments, but people tend to get vicious when they fear. Prejudices leave no room for reason or fact." This wasn't like him at all. He didn't spare people's feelings -- least of all Blake's -- didn't even care to concern himself with them. This whole miserable business was playing havoc with him.

"It would make sense, though," Blake commented.

"Yes, it would." Who needed a mutoid's balance upset by sex urges kicking-in? Avon wished Blake didn't sound so artless. He had been far more comfortable with the rebel's quarrelsome mood. "Pointless to dwell on any of it now, as you've said." *Give Orac a chance*, he was about to add, but bit it back.

Oh, no, that was definitely too much. Now he was into pipedreams. Orac might not even exist anymore. Abruptly, he slid down and rolled to his side with his back to Blake, hoping to discourage further conversation.

Not quite. Blake chose to close the subject in his own way. "It does help to know something about it. Thank you."

Of all the times for the man to turn courteous and appreciative. Avon gritted his teeth. "I didn't tell you anything new. It isn't like you to seek confirmation on things you already know -- or things you don't know, for that matter.

"I didn't know, Avon. Not really."

"Come on, Blake. Surely you've had elementary biology."

"I must have."

That made Avon roll around to face him, not that it made much of a difference in the night. "You don't remember? Something as basic as that?" *And we let this man lead us to hell and back*, he despaired. *We deserve everything we get*. "Just how wide are these gaps in memory?"

"How do you tell what you don't remember when you don't remember it? Certainly, there are things I know I should remember, but...I'm an engineer. I was trained at Moonbase High Tech. I can build you, say, an interface capacitor from scratch."

"I'm impressed, but that's not the point."

"The point is, I can do that, but don't ask me how a holograph image works. A second grade Beta student can tell you that, but I can't, not without looking it up. There are gaps, things

that don't connect, or things that float around, all there, but out of sequence, and won't fall into the right order."

Avon had thought he couldn't imagine living with a mutoid's body. Living with an incapacitated brain was an even more horrifying prospect. "Why didn't you ever try to see if Orac could do something about it? It's capable of...."

"No!"

The vehemence didn't startle Avon. It had to be difficult for Blake to contemplate anything hooked into his brain again.

"I'd be scared of losing what I do have," the rebel finished, more evenly. "What's wrong?" he then asked, out of the blue.

Puzzled at first, Avon realized he had been alternately rubbing and scratching his hands and arms. "Nothing. I scrubbed too hard. I think I'm getting a rash." He forced himself to ignore the itchy feeling.

"Why don't you rest?" Blake suggested. "I'll keep watch."

Avon squinted at the backpack. "I take it there's only one blanket."

"Yes.

"Come here then."

"I'm all right."

"Blake, it would conserve immeasurable energy if we didn't have to bicker over every little point. Our clothes are barely dry, it's cold, there's one blanket, get over here."

Blake obeyed. They both found acceptable positions, Blake on his back and Avon on his side, facing away. "Are you asleep?" the rebel asked in a few minutes.

Avon had always considered that a particularly self-defeating question. Or a self-serving one, depending on the point of view. "Obviously not."

"I'd like to ask you something."

"Don't let me stop you -- you never do."

"Why did you come after me?"

"Three against one aren't great odds," Avon chose to say. As worded, it was true. That it didn't apply was nobody's business.

"You're not going to tell me," Blake concluded. Long minutes later, he asked again. "Why do you stay?"

Avon stifled a sigh. "Just at the moment, I can't think of a place to go."

"You know what I mean. Why do you stay with the Liberator?"

"You've just answered your own question -- to stay with the Liberator."

"It doesn't work, Avon. You had that chance already."

Avon couldn't help a barb. After all, Blake had brought up the subject. "As you seem to know and guard against, I play the odds. I didn't like them in that case."

"What, two hours' head start wasn't enough for you? With the Liberator's speed?"

Indignant, Avon glared over his shoulder. "Have you been checking up on me?"

"I was curious. I asked Zen a few questions. So why?"

"If you can conduct your own investigations, you can damn well draw your own conclusions." The Federation interrogators were wasting their time in thinking up tortures; close confinement with Blake was all they would ever need. To add insult to injury, what was annoying him no end seemed to be cheering up Blake.

"What else can I do, if you 'won't tell me?" the rebel said lightly. "However, if you told me why you stay, I might not jump to wrong conclusions."

"Certainly not for the sake of peace and privacy," Avon snapped, then suggested, "Inertia?"

Blake chuckled. "Okay, don't tell me that either."

"Maybe I'm waiting for a good offer."

"Which I believe you've already had."

"What?"

"At XK72. Don't tell me they didn't jump at the chance of gaining someone of your caliber."

"As a matter of fact, they did." Avon wondered why he kept talking. Perhaps to keep at bay the sleep, which was again creeping up on him, annoying him almost as much as Blake. "But other considerations came up. Just as well. It became an unhealthy place, if you'll remember."

"You didn't know that at the time. You took a big gamble on the chance that the Liberator would make it."

Okay. If the man insisted on figuring out puzzles, he should have a real one, Avon decided. "Quite the contrary, I came back on the chance that the Liberator might not make it." There. That ought to keep Blake's brain circuits in more of a mess for a while.

And maybe, just maybe, on the off, off -- impossible, really -- chance that he actually worked through that to understanding, then perhaps not only Blake but also Avon would have the

answer to the question of why he stayed.

Blake seemed to be mulling it over. "How badly will I offend you if I said I find that hard to believe?"

Well, he had already labeled the chance impossible. "Not in the least," Avon replied, firmly quelling a small pang he refused to acknowledge as disappointment. "I only said that for the sake of accuracy. I don't expect you to believe. Why don't you leave the abstracts alone and concentrate on the immediate realities. As in where the hell do we go from here?" Prospects weren't numerous, let alone attractive.

"We'll hook up with the resistance group."

Avon snorted. "Wasn't this Kasabi's sector? If a sixteen year old girl was able to patch together anything resembling a resistance group in a few months, who knows where they'll be. We have no transportation to venture far."

"They'll find us."

"Oh, of course, your all-knowing, all-seeing followers. Where were they this past week then?"

"I left a message."

Avon bolted upright. "You did what!"

"A message, I left a message."

"And why in hell would you do something like that?"

"It's customary. The deserters from the city wouldn't know the lay of the land. They're instructed to leave messages. Our people check the hiding places regularly."

Avon had stopped listening, was already on his feet. "Dammit, Blake, how did you manage to live so long? Come on, move! We're leaving." He yanked the blanket away.

"What is the...?"

"I'll tell you," he interrupted, throwing things together. "Your rebels, if they're still out there, harbor more spies than ideals. If you've forgotten your experiences, I haven't." He put on the jacket. "Besides, where's the guarantee they'll be the ones to get your message? If I were running the security around here, I'd leave the survival packs alone to trap the deserters myself by..." Suddenly, he froze. "Oh, hell! How did *I* manage to live so long? Leave everything, except what we came with."

Blake was also up, but looking lost. "Why?"

"Because the other thing I'd do is hide tracers in the survival packs, and we don't have time to search. Why the hell didn't I think of that sooner? Come on, Blake. It might already be too late."

* * *

The whine of the patrol vehicles reached them shortly after dawn.

* * *

Vila came to the flight deck, loudly complaining of his trials and tribulations. "Sssh," Cally admonished. "Jenna is sleeping."

"Lucky Jenna." He launched into complaints once more, but in a lower voice, stripping off the bulky life-support suit.

Cally interrupted. "Zen says the way to the medical unit is clear now. We should check on the guard."

"Uh, yeah, well, do we really have to do that? I mean, it may not be a pretty sight."

"Don't worry, Vila. Life support in the medical unit operates on emergency generators. He may not have enjoyed the ride, but he should be in one piece."

"Oh, in that case...well, I'll just trot on over there and see if all's in order. We might need the facilities, you know. Who knows what shape Avon will be in, or Blake, I mean, after all this time. Gotta make sure we're ready to..."

Cally interrupted again. "I'm sure your motives are inspiring, Vila. All the same, *I'll* see to the medical unit. Stay here and keep an eye on the scanners."

"Do bring back some adrenalin and soma, Cally," Vila was begging as she left the flight deck. "It is for medicinal purposes. I am expiring."

* * *

Blake had been falling back for a while and Avon had slackened his pace as well. Still, as soon as they made it into the woods, he found himself running alone. He turned to see the rebel leaning heavily against a tree and gasping for breath.

"Go on," Blake panted, waving him away when Avon backtracked. "It can't be more than a kilometer or two."

They had been heading for a deserted mine -- theoretically. "We're not going to make it, Blake. Every time we go a kilometer or two, you claim it's another couple of kilometers. Face it, you don't remember." Blake looked downcast enough to make him add, "Or it's been covered up."

Judging by the hum of engines, the patrols were tightening a circular search pattern. It was impossible to tell whether the two men would eventually be caught in its parameters, but the sound of one engine had been getting steadily, insistently closer. "Come on, Blake." Avon tugged urgently at his arm.

"I'm slowing you down. Go on ahead." Avon didn't waste his breath; simply yanked. Blake resisted. "Listen. Even if they know it's me they're following, chances are they don't know about you. I can draw them off."

It should have been a perfectly reasonable suggestion. Why should they both be in danger? Besides, wasn't it Blake's fault anyway that the patrols were after them? However, Avon was surprised to discover that a reasonable suggestion wasn't always an acceptable one. "You might be right, but we'll use that in a different way," he said, unhooking from his belt the helmet he had been stubbornly keeping. "I'm tired of dashing about like a hunted animal. I want that skimmer. Get out just to the edge of the clearing. Maybe you can tempt them to land and follow you in here." As the rebel left, Avon slid on the helmet, tried to make the uniform look as proper as possible, then positioned himself behind a tree.

The skimmer finally became visible. It was low, its forward momentum lessened by a pendulum-like motion that expanded its area of search with each upward swing. Blake waited for it to get closer, then broke cover from behind a boulder and ran back into the trees. The skimmer's nose instantly zeroed in.

Blake stopped long enough to see where Avon was, then ducked behind another large tree, and pulled the handgun out. "It's a two-seater."

"Yes, I can tell. Come on, come on." They would have reported the sighting; the backup wouldn't be far behind the lone skimmer. The time was likely to be awfully short. At least the vehicle was landing. It touched ground, then slid forward right up to the trees. The hatches on either side lifted like the wings of a bird. The guards had to be tempted to come out into the open, somehow. The presence of another guard might do it. "I'm going to step out," Avon mouthed at Blake. "The uniform should give them pause. Don't waste it." He saw Blake's acknowledging nod, and moved out,.

The ploy was unnecessary. Two figures were already jumping out of the vehicle. Avon's movement drew their attention. The uniform did give them pause, but their appearance also gave Avon pause. A man and a woman. Both in rumpled fatigues. No helmets.

The hesitation lasted a brief instant. "It's a trap!" the woman shouted, then lifted her weapon. Avon immediately went into a crouch, took aim, hoping Blake would take care of the man.

"HOLD IT!" Blake's authoritative shout froze everybody as the rebel revealed himself.

Each side inspected the other, everyone except Blake crouching protectively with fingers poised on triggers. "Who are you?" the woman demanded after a beat, addressing Blake, but her eyes never left Avon.

"My name is Blake. He's with me. The uniform is just a disguise."

The woman's eyes flickered briefly toward the rebel. "Blake? Roj Blake?"

"Yes, he is, Maya." The confirmation came from her companion, exultantly. "I recognize him."

"Who is he?" The woman indicated Avon.

Avon jumped in before Blake could obligingly introduce him. "I have a better question. Who are you?"

The young man seemed to be the more gregarious of the two. "We're from the North-East Sector resistance. This is Maya, I'm Karl. You're Roj Blake!" he exclaimed, his worshipful tone instantly making Avon nauseous. "How come...? What are you...? We didn't know you were coming. The patrols are after you."

"We know that," Avon snapped, relaxing his grip on the rifle as the woman lowered hers. "What we don't know is what you are doing in a Federation patrol skimmer."

"Oh, we stole that a long time ago. We always do this," the man supplied, sounding awfully proud. "When a large number of patrols are out following somebody, we just sidle in from the edges and they think we're one of them. We've been able to snatch a lot of people from right under their..."

"I'm sure," Avon interrupted impatiently. He wasn't sure about Blake's rebels, but they were getting trapped. "And if you don't want to spoil your record, I suggest we go, now."

The woman was obviously more practical. She was already in the vehicle, turning it. Avon climbed up the hatch she had left open and squeezed into the tiny space behind her seat. She craned her neck to look at him. "And you are?"

"My name is Avon."

"Take off the helmet, Avon." She looked at him closely when he complied, then turned back to the instruments. Blake and Karl were also in the vehicle, the rebel trying to gather information on this particular portion of his rabble, the young man babbling on adoringly. Avon decided it was going to be a long trip.

* * *

"Were you able to send a message?" was the first thing Jenna wanted to know when Cally awakened her. Vila, despite a dose of vitalizer -not quite the mixture he had asked for -- was already dozing at one end of the couch. The Auron didn't think she could stay on her feet any longer herself

"Out of range, Jenna," she supplied, dropping into the place the pilot vacated. "Orac says the signal can be boosted through a Federation satellite, but we might give away our location as well as theirs."

"Well, not a message then, but...how about just pulses to activate the communicators? That'll be considered a stray interference on the frequency."

"By Avon, too," Cally pointed out.

"It's better than nothing. Not by much, I know, but let's try anyway." Jenna headed for Orac and Cally gratefully put her head down.

"You can send a message if you can send pulses." That came from Vila, who obviously hadn't been all that deeply asleep.

"Any message they'll comprehend, the Federation might, too."

"Maybe not, I think there's a way. Might not work, though. There was this old guy when I was little, used to tell stories, but he called them history. Funny old coot. Could break into anywhere, but he'd break into libraries and archives. To read, he used to say. I don't know what he..."

"Vila," Jenna interrupted impatiently, "if you know something, say it."

"Like I said, might not work, or Avon might not understand it, but, well, you see, a very long time ago, at least that's what he said..."

"Vila!"

Jenna's threatening voice was the last thing Cally registered.

* * *

The North-East Sector Resistance Cell consisted of perhaps three dozen men and women, some of them barely out of puberty, a few infants and toddlers, an ill-nourished lot living like refugees in yet another abandoned mine. *Blake's army*, Avon despaired as they flocked around the bedraggled man as if he were a legend suddenly come to life. *How appropriate.*

Carefully stepping away from the crowd, Avon wondered if it was any use asking for some way to wash up. The place was a makeshift refuge. However, by then the need to get clean was more immediate to him than fatigue, hunger, or thirst. And he felt like he might go out of his mind if he didn't soon get the gloves off and put some cold compresses on his hands and arms. The leather had aggravated the rash unbearably, and now felt like it was stuck to his skin, rubbing against raw nerves. It was no longer an itchy, stinging sensation he could bear by gritting his teeth. It burned, it throbbed, and it hurt. He had kept the gloves on so far, fearing his bare skin might have gotten too sensitive to handle the rifle effectively, but now the distraction was threatening to become more crippling.

He motioned Maya to one side and asked if they had any facilities where he could wash. He was led to a chamber. Water cascaded down rough-hewn walls, forming a small pool, and flowed out through a large crack into lower levels. No immediate way to heat it was visible, and Avon wasn't offered one. That was all right; he felt somewhat feverish anyway. Maya pointed out some items on a ledge. He figured what passed for towels were communal, but he wasn't in a position to be too fastidious.

"I can probably get you some clean clothes," she said, "if you're not fussy about the fit."

"Not at the moment," he mumbled and she left. He would wipe the uniform and hang onto it, but it would be a relief to have something clean between it and his body.

For a little longer, Avon resisted the imperative to pull the gloves off. Cringing at the idea of doing anything with his bare hands in their state, he shed his clothes first, then sat on the ground and started to gingerly pry off one of the gloves. It felt as though he were peeling off his skin. Deciding against prolonging the agony, he yanked off the glove, and couldn't stifle the gasp of pain. He stared at his hand. It was swollen, raw-red, and felt like fiery pins were embedded in it. He could no longer dismiss this as an inconvenient skin irritation. He realized he should have taken Orac's advice and waited for organic implants to be grown from a culture of his own tissue instead of opting for the time-saving synthetics.

"That looks terrible. Let me see."

He jumped. The pain was forgotten for a moment. He wondered what else he could have expected from people who lived like a herd in the wilds. "If you don't mind..."

Dropping to her knees beside him, Maya interrupted. "We have no doctors. I used to be a med-tech. I'm the best you'll find here."

That made a slight difference. "Then you might be of some use -- *later*."

"Gracious soul, aren't you? What's wrong with...oh, for the love of..." She pulled a towel from the ledge, shook it out, threw it across his lap. "Better?"

"Not appreciably," he muttered, but allowed her to look at his hand. "Don't you have any concept of privacy here?"

"Depends. Let's deal with your hand first. Is it just this one, or...?" She pulled at the remaining glove. Gritting his teeth, he let her. "Oh, damn," she said when she saw both hands were in the same condition. "Do you know what caused this? Does it hurt badly?"

He grimaced. "I see you use the word 'best' unduly. Yes, I know what caused it: synthetic implants I seem to be allergic to -- and yes, it hurts."

She was unperturbed. "If you have an analyzer to be recalibrated, I'm a whiz. But this... I think the implants should be removed, but I wouldn't do it."

"I wouldn't let you," he put in.

"I'll consider that an agreement. So, right now all I can offer you is a pair of hands, which is more than you've got yourself."

"No, thank you," he refused. "I can manage perfectly well."

"I see you also use words unduly." She shrugged and rose. "Have it your way."

She left him alone. When pride met reality, Avon had cause to regret refusing her offer, but if she had walked back in and repeated it, he would have refused again. Worse than feeling incapacitated was someone else knowing he felt incapacitated. Soaking his hands frequently at the point where water ran into the chamber, where it was coldest, numbed them. He washed and dried off in spurts, put on the khaki jumper she had left. He had to roll up the sleeves and the legs and tighten the drawstring at the waist.

Avon stared glumly at his hands. Unless he braced for the pain and forced himself to carry on, he was likely to flinch from any contact. That wouldn't do. If nothing else, he had to be able to handle the rifle. The gloves had served as insulation at least. He debated if he could stand pulling them on again.

He was still debating when Maya walked in and held out a bowlful of something. Avon recoiled, wrinkling his nose as he caught an odious whiff. "What in creation is that?"

"Don't ask," she said cheerfully. "It's only a topical so it won't cure anything. But it'll help ease the burning, reduce the swelling, and help the pain."

"Is that a fond theory, or did you, by some miracle, find a hardy soul to actually test it?"

"The smell is an initial chemical reaction. It fades quickly."

"It better," Avon grumbled, "or I'd say you've found a foolproof way to avoid Federation troops." He looked from the bowl to the gloves, picked one up and attempted to turn it inside out.

Maya put the bowl down. "Give it here." He scowled, but handed it over for the sake of expediency. "Both?" He nodded. "Now what?" she asked when she was through.

"I'd like them washed thoroughly."

"Oh, I see." She washed and dried them carefully, turned them right side out again, then coated them liberally on the inside with the poultice before giving them back. "The constant pressure isn't going to be very enjoyable."

"One can get used to constant anything without necessarily enjoying it. I ought to know; I live with Blake."

That seemed to be a reminder. "Oh, yes, he's waiting for me."

"I'd rather he didn't know," Avon thought to say as she was leaving, indicating his hands.

"It's your business. See, we do have a notion of privacy."

Perspiration was popping out all over his face by the time the gloves were on, but in a few minutes the medication started to work, and they actually made fair bandages. Avon gripped the rifle experimentally. All right, that felt steady enough. He didn't dare think what other symptoms would show up. He knew he was running a fever, but it wasn't debilitating. Yet.

He decided to find Blake and persuade him to rest. Apparently, he wasn't going to be in much of a shape to sustain Blake as well, so the man had to reduce the exertion on his system to gain time. Time for what, Avon didn't quite know.

* * *

Blake was getting impatient. The leader of this group, off somewhere after a shipment of arms, had left the woman, Maya, in charge. She had disappeared. So had Avon, but right now,

Blake preferred not to have Avon around. He was thinking of looking for the woman himself when she showed up at the makeshift arsenal where Blake was inspecting the meager cache of weapons and explosives.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's all right," he said, careful not to show he didn't mean it. His body was again starting to make him too aware of the passage of time. "I want to ask you a few things." He rose from where he was kneeling, running his fingers through his wet hair. Karl had supplied him with bowls of warm water and a too-small pair of fatigues. He had left the shirt half open and it still restricted him across the shoulders. "Do you have...?"

"You need clean bandages," she said, interrupting him.

Dismayed, he lowered his hand from his hair, but arrested the motion before he instinctively hid it behind his back. "No, it's not an injury... uh, a minor sprain. Do you have any flyers here, apart from that skimmer? Long-range ones?"

"We have a hovercraft. But some of our people are using it to transport arms. I don't know when they'll be back."

"Any access to space vehicles?"

"Hardly. I take it you need a way to return to your ship?"

"Not me, no. And I don't know if my ship still exists. What I need from you is to get Avon off-planet as soon as possible." He approached her, knowing it would make her more responsive. He didn't understand why, but it frequently proved useful. Personally, he preferred to keep his distance. Perhaps that was why people felt singled out when he chose one to approach, maybe even touch, to pull them into his private sphere -- where he ruled, but they seemed willing to accept that. Except Avon, of course. Avon always knew when he was being manipulated. But still allowed it. Sometimes.

"He can't afford to stay on Earth," he continued. "And this isn't even his fight. Will you help me?"

"Of course. If I can. Until our scouts report the patrols have cleared the area, we can't move freely. But afterwards we can arrange something."

He held her eyes. "It has to be more specific than that."

"When the hovercraft gets back, we can take him to a better hiding place until there's a way to get him off-planet. What about you?"

He stepped back. Sometimes the ploy backfired. He had involved her enough to be interested in his plans as well. "I have to leave. I have a job to do. If you'll allow me, I'd like to take some explosives with me." He turned to distance himself more and studied the racks.

"Where are you going?"

"It's better if no one knows that."

"Blake, this is a secure cell. We don't have any leaks."

"Oh, he's not worried about that."

Blake whirled around at Avon's voice, silently cursing. The man seemed to spring out of nowhere to hear what he wasn't meant to hear -- all too often.

"He doesn't want *me* to find out where he's going," Avon went on. "Your concern might be a lot more commendable, Blake, if you didn't overrule my choices in the meantime."

"You know you always have a choice, Avon."

"So you keep telling me. For some strange reason, I even believe you sometimes. Not this time." Holding Blake's eyes, he addressed Maya. "Excuse us, I need to have a private talk with my self-appointed leader who feels at liberty to rule my life -- behind my back!"

She looked from one man to the other, seeming to feel the sparks flying between them. "Should you be conducting it in an armory?"

Blake postponed glaring at Avon in favor of smiling charmingly at her. He had her on his side and intended to keep her there. "With Avon's tongue, Maya, weapons are superfluous. Please, if you could check on the situation outside for me?"

She smiled back at him. "I'll let you know."

"Thank you."

Avon snickered after her. "Another convert, I see. It took you, what, all of three minutes?"

"People respond to common courtesy, Avon. Something you may not have noticed."

. "I don't have to notice. I've always known that hypocrisy is...quite...common." The last word dripped disdain.

Nobody could turn mere words into insults just by a slight inflection of voice as masterfully as Avon. "I suppose you think honesty is the excuse for rudeness."

"I don't excuse it!" Avon snapped. "Speaking of honesty, do you think you can tell me where you're slinking off to?"

There was no sense in secrecy anymore. "I am going back to the Security Complex."

"I see. Apart from negating all I did to get you out of their hands, what other purpose will that serve?"

"I have to know if any of my crew is there. Remember them, Avon?"

Avon chose to ignore the question. "I'm sure you believe you can simply whisk them away if they're there. Just for the sake of argument, say you can't, or they're not there, then what?"

Blake picked a positron charge off the rack, weighed it in his palm. "I left too many pieces of myself in that place." So many, in fact, that he didn't even know the full extent of it. His fingers curled around the explosive until the grip hurt. "Surely you can understand," he found himself whispering, startled to realize he wanted Avon to understand -- very much.

"I understand revenge. Indeed, I do." Had Avon's voice softened slightly? Blake looked at him, and saw only stubborn determination in the dark eyes. "But I hope never to understand suicide missions."

Blake shrugged. "It isn't like I have a choice." He was learning to judge his condition. He figured he had perhaps eight or ten hours. "I don't have much time left."

"Nonsense. They can hide you as well as they can hide me, and get us both off planet."

Blake was getting angry again. "And how long can I keep hiding this?" He lifted his right hand, the inside of his wrist turned toward the other man.

"Do you have to?"

He laughed, short, bitter. "I'm not that much of a dreamer, Avon. As you've said, fear and hate have no rationale. There are people here who have seen their families and friends massacred by mutoids." He turned away, inspecting the shelves with unseeing eyes. "Face it, this makes me an outcast. I don't belong anywhere." The irony of it was -- as grateful as he was for it -- he didn't even belong among the mutoids. *Neither fish nor fowl...*

He felt a presence right at his shoulder blades, and realized he had momentarily forgotten Avon. Turning around, he found himself trapped between the man and the rack. Avon reached for his hand. Startled at the unexpected action, he stayed still.

"Unpredictable contraption, that," Avon said in explanation. "Even body heat might activate it." He removed the explosive Blake had forgotten about and returned it to the shelf.

"Oh," was all Blake could think to say.

Avon didn't move away. "Nobody needs to know, Blake," he continued, quietly. "As long as I do, nobody else needs to know."

For just an instant, there was an almost tangible...something...between them. Something Blake was tempted to reach for, take, and not let go. Then the reality of the situation broke over him again and he knew he might as well cry for the moon.

He shouldered past the smaller man. "Really? What do you intend to become? My food dispenser? For life? Don't be absurd, Avon."

Silence made him turn. Avon was looking lost, unsure. Blake wondered if it was possible he had made the offer without considering what it entailed. Ridiculous. Avon didn't make rash offers. But one had been made. Probably because the man was too obstinate to give up.

Avon spread his hands, a helpless motion that Blake had never -- ever -- seen him make. "I don't know how long I can keep it up, but..."

Obstinate as a single function isomorphic unit, Blake decided and interrupted harshly. "I'll tell you exactly how long. Until you come to your senses and leave me to die, or until I kill you. One body can't keep two systems running indefinitely. And you ought to know that."

What was the matter with Avon? This wasn't like him at all. Blake was getting the feeling he was missing a piece of the puzzle. As usual, it irritated him. "If you don't mind, I'd rather choose my own way. Gan would be alive today if it wasn't for me. And before you get around to reminding me, I may not know what happened to the Liberator, but I'm all too aware that it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't insisted on going to Exbar. I'd prefer not to add you to the list as well." He was halfway out of the chamber when he heard Avon call.

"Blake."

He stopped, didn't feel like turning around. "Yes!" he snapped.

"I have to tell you something."

He waited. "Well?"

"You're wrong. Whatever happened to the Liberator, it wasn't solely you..."

Beep.

The familiar sound interrupted Avon; made Blake spin on his heels. For the next few seconds, they stayed frozen.

The beeping continued.

It was coming from the bracelet in Avon's pocket. "It's the Liberator!" Blake shouted.

Next thing he knew, he was digging for the bracelet, unmindful that the pocket happened to be Avon's, or that the man was attempting to get at it himself. With a sharp hiss of breath Blake couldn't worry about at the moment, Avon jerked his hand back and let him pull it out.

Blake pushed the transmit button and got dead silence. Unwilling to give up hope, he tried again. And again. Nothing. The communicator just kept beeping. Then that stopped as well.

The rebel felt like crushing the useless thing. "Must've been some electronic interference," he muttered. *Oh, damn.*

The next sound he heard was so incongruous that he stared at Avon in astonishment. The man was laughing. It built from a soft chuckle, rose, until he threw his head back and the sound held no restraints whatsoever. Blake's astonishment threatened to explode into fury.

"What the hell's so amusing!?"

Avon drew a deep breath, and abruptly stopped laughing. His eyes were still sparkingly alive, though. "That's...elegant. Subtle and to the point. I'd like to know who thought of it."

"Avon!" Blake hissed, having to control his voice as well as the rest of him.

"I gather you didn't bother to count the signals."

That threw the rebel. "No."

"What would you do without me?" Avon asked lightly, unsettling Blake further with that bit of frivolity. "It had a pattern: one, three, five, seven, eleven, stop."

"Prime numbers. So?"

"Ah, you do remember some of your basics after all."

"I assume they mean something?"

"You should study your space history, Blake. There was a time when mankind was restricted to this planet. There were radio astronomy installations on Earth to send out and receive prime numbers. Humans had a benevolent attitude toward space then. They waited for a message from the stars, fervently hoping, wide-eyed idealists that they were."

Blake held onto his patience with monumental effort. "So, what was a transmission of prime numbers supposed to mean in the good old days?" he asked sarcastically.

Avon flashed him a smile. A rare, genuine smile. He quoted, "You are not alone."

Blake felt weak with sudden relief. "Then they're all right."

"And very timely." Avon smiled again, shaking his head, as if at a private joke. "Are you all set on death and destruction, Blake, or will you give life a chance?"

Hope stirred on the heels of relief. Maybe there was still time. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Good. Let's find your recruits and see what we can do to get out of this mess."

"Avon?" Blake halted on their way out of the chamber. "You were telling me something."

"So I was. It can wait." He looked down at himself, then at Blake. "Let's hope these people are better organized than evidence suggests so far."

Blake recognized the evasive tactic, but suddenly in an expansive mood himself, allowed it. "Meaning?"

"Look at the clothes they gave each of us, when a simple switch would've solved everything."

"Well, Avon, it isn't too late to redress that at least." He started unbuttoning his shirt.

Avon looked pained, but amusement was playing around the corners of his mouth.

* * *

A wood plank set on bricks was serving as a work table. On it were placed maps for their perusal. Avon leaned over Blake's shoulder, amused at how the crowd swayed back to give him plenty of personal space. He didn't know if it was an instinctive reaction to the black uniform he had donned again, or because of his own forbidding attitude. Useful, in any case.

"Why can't you just stay with us until your ship picks you up?" Karl was asking.

Only Avon noticed how Blake's right arm went into hiding under the table top. "The signal must've been boosted by some means," the man said, "since we can't raise them from this end."

"They could be anywhere," Avon added.

"Who knows how long they'll take to get here," Blake continued, studying the map for various Federation installations.

"Besides," Avon put in, "we strayed from the teleport coordinates."

Blake picked up from him. "They can't locate us unless they open communications or go into random pickup search pattern."

"And if they have any sense, they won't," Avon attempted to continue.

"Not around Earth, not during a security alert," Blake finished for him.

Annoyed, Avon clamped his mouth shut, determined not to say another word until he could speak like an individual, not one half of a team. He didn't at all care for the easy familiarity that implied.

He weighed their options. It was inadvisable to attempt to return to the original coordinates. The stolen patrol skimmer could be inconspicuous during a far-flung search, but taking it back to base would invite too close a scrutiny. Further, he couldn't be sure when the Liberator would show up. They needed freedom of movement, and that was all he could be sure of. They didn't have the luxury of making definitive long-range plans; time was fast running out.

Maya charged in, looking like she had been running hard, also looking terribly pleased. "You wanted a space vehicle, Blake. There's one close by."

Avon winced. What was it about Blake that made people so damned eager to comply with his wishes, to live up to his expectations?

"A small cruiser is out there, a mile or so behind the patrols, about here," she continued, pointing at the map, "supervising the search. Not security. A Space Command HQ vehicle by the markings."

Servalan? Avon wondered.

Maya motioned the fighters to her side. "We'll secure it for you."

"No," Blake objected. "Avon and I will attempt that. It's our problem. We'll take our own chances. You're serving an important purpose; you're needed here."

"And you're needed everywhere, Blake. We're doing no more than keeping a thumb in the dam. We need you out there, to give us a real chance."

"Let me do it my way, Maya. And I promise you, if I get out of this, I'm going to find Central Control. That's when we will all have a real chance."

Oh hell, here we go again, Avon suddenly felt too weary for even a sigh. *Why don't we worry about where your next meal is coming from, Blake?*

An explosion ripped through the caverns. Everything rocked violently for an instant, then the whole enclosure seemed to vibrate, dust and debris started raining down as weathered overhead supports shook.

Blake was on his feet. "What the...?"

Avon hurried to put the helmet on and grabbed his gun. "Offhand, I'd say we've been found."

"That's the west entrance," Maya said. "They must have blown the barricade -- damn it, what happened to the lookouts?"

"Asleep on the job?" Avon suggested unkindly.

Maya looked daggers at him, then started directing her people. The rebels burst into purposeful action. Avon had to admit that they were indeed organized, and indulged in a smile despite the harried moment. Blake was standing there, his mouth open to issue orders, and just realizing that nobody needed them. There was nothing for him to take charge of here -- oh, the ignominy of it.

Let alone taking charge, Blake was being shoved around unceremoniously by the woman. She thrust a rifle into his hand. "Take this, better than that handgun. Karl, take them to the skimmer. We'll hold off here as long as we can."

"Not here," Avon felt obligated to warn as Karl hustled them along. "Those struts are going to give."

"I'm counting on it," he heard Maya call back, sounding sadistically gleeful. "I'm going to bring it down over their heads."

Avon looked at the supports lining the shaft they were running along and decided they should best be out of the tunnels altogether by the time she did. He lunged forward and took the lead. "Hurry up, Blake," he shouted over his shoulder. "All the beams are unstable."

Sounds of firing -- whines from paraguns and staccato noises from the more primitive weapons of the rebels -- were already echoing through the shafts. Along the way, they had to look out for splintered wood and chunks of rocks tumbling from the roof, slowly but inevitably giving in to the instability introduced by the explosion. A fine graphite dust was mottling the air, slick where it drifted down to the uneven surface.

They rounded a junction and found the way blocked. A large metal bucket, into which supply boxes and children had been haphazardly piled for evacuation, was stuck on the ancient rails it was meant to glide on. A tall woman, harnessed to the thing like a beast of burden, was pulling desperately as two teenagers and an old man leaned their shoulders into it, trying to force it over the buckled portion of the rails.

This they call freedom? Avon thought fleetingly. Without missing a beat, he bounded onto a rock ledge to clear the bucket, jumped down on the other side and took the intersecting shaft. His knowledge of Blake brought him up short after a few paces. He turned. Sure enough, Blake had stopped on the far side of the bucket to help. He was struggling to literally lift the thing over the hump.

It would be useless to tell him to forget it. Briefly, Avon went so far as to consider lending a hand -- to expedite matters, he told himself; certainly not for the almost-eerily quiet ragged urchins in there. But he knew his hands couldn't take even a fraction of that weight right now, and he was none too sure of the rest of him either. Besides, every instinct was clamoring for haste at the ominous rumblings in the foundations of the caverns.

"Hurry it up," he called out instead. "I'll start up the skimmer."

He caught Blake's look before he turned. No, not disappointment. More like the look of a man who hadn't expected any better. Avon continued down the tunnel, suddenly furious. *I never claimed to be the savior of humankind. Even one is more than I care to handle, and if you don't get to the skimmer by the time I'm ready to go, I just might leave you.*

Behind him, he heard the screeching of metal against metal and knew the bucket was on its way to the back exit. He had to get to the vertical shaft that had at one time served as an air vent or elevator housing. Now, it held the skimmer at the bottom of it.

He found himself listening for footsteps behind him against the sounds of combat filtering through. He was telling himself he wasn't going to look back, when another explosion rocked the caverns, throwing him off his feet. He stayed huddled where he fell while an unbroken cloud of dust billowed up, making him doubly grateful for the helmet. In a few seconds he was reasonably sure nothing more than debris was about to come crashing down, and, clambering to his feet before the dust even settled, turned to look.

About ten meters behind him the cave-in was complete. No way in, no way out. He was alone. No sound, not even the noises from weapons, was reaching him anymore.

Dispassionately, he took stock. The Federation troops could no longer catch up with him. Chances were, they hadn't yet stumbled onto the skimmer's shaft, or flanking operations would have already started. More than likely, he was free. He had a vehicle. And it looked like he had only himself to worry about. Nothing short of a power mole or a few dozen men were going to be able to burrow through that mound of rock. He had only a pair of hands, much the worse for wear at the moment. Not a damned thing left for him to do. Except get himself out. Fine.

But he found himself holding the teleport bracelet -- along with his breath, until he found the bracelet intact. "Blake," he said into it. "Blake, can you hear me? Blake?"

No answer. It might or might not mean anything. The blasted things were so fragile that most of the time they were more of a liability than anything else. He kept on trying anyway.

"Blake, are you there? Even if you can't answer, try to push the transmit button. Come on, Blake, I have to know if you're still there."

Why, he didn't quite know. It was just as well no answer came. What could he have done about it anyway? Not a damned thing. He turned away.

The bracelet came to life before he could tuck it away, making him whirl around. "Blake?" He finally identified the sound as coughing if not choking. "Is that you? Can you talk?"

"Yes... I ... Yes." Another fit of sputters came through.

"Are you injured? Can you move?"

"No... I don't think so, no."

"Gather your wits, Blake!" he snapped irritably. "Which is it, you're not injured or you can't move?"

"I'm all right. I can...yes, I can move."

"Okay, fine." *What's so fine about it?* he wondered. Now he had to formulate options -- practically in a vacuum. "How bad is it in there?"

"I don't know -- it's dark."

"Well, feel around. Are you blocked in? Are you alone?"

Silence, except for scraping sounds, then, "Very little space. Karl is here... I th--" A few beats. "No, he isn't."

His tone told Avon that the young man was dead. "Do you have any way out?" he asked quickly to distract Blake. "Come on, we don't have all day."

"The children... did they get away?"

"How the hell do I know? Let's worry about one thing at a time. The obstruction is solid from this end. You're the engineer; you tell me if it looks more promising on any other side." He listened intently, but heard only silence apart from labored breathing. "Blake, answer me!"

"There isn't...much air."

"Oh. Okay, conserve what there is. You'd probably bring the whole thing down on yourself anyway. Blake, did you hear me? Blake? Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Could you trouble yourself to indicate that?"

"Why? Not much to say." Something like a chuckle issued. "Never was...was there, Avon?"

Inexplicably, it stung. "This isn't the time for philosophy," he snapped. "Just stay still, and try to stay alive. I'll get you out."

Blake didn't respond. Avon put the bracelet away, and ran for the skimmer, marveling and despairing at himself at the same time. When had 'not a damn thing to do' become 'I'll get you out'? And how was he supposed to accomplish that anyway?

* * *

It was frustrating. The might of the Federation, at the center of its power, and one man, a fugitive still evading capture.

Not one man, Servalan corrected herself. And that was the problem, she was sure. Another problem was the bumbling security troops. She should have brought her mutoids.

"Cave-in?" she snapped at her pilot who had brought the news to her cabin. "They'd better find Blake alive, or they're going to be very sorry." The Supreme Commander didn't like having her plans thwarted. "I want all the prisoners brought here, on the double." She noted how her pilot fidgeted. "I take it then there aren't any live prisoners?"

"Not so far." The man looked like he expected to be blamed for it.

She didn't mind the deaths of rebels in the slightest. Except there was no potential to dead bodies. They only aided the process of elimination. "Have the bodies collected. I will see each one personally. And tell them to use the bore cannons discreetly. I don't want any more deaths." Not until she decreed them, at any rate. "There have to be other entrances to the miserable pit. They'd better find them, and now."

Her guard appeared in the doorway. "One of the patrol vehicles is coming in, Supreme Commander."

"All right." She waved both men away. "Go see what disgrace they have to report this time." This one had to be a beaut if someone was personally coming in for it.

She waited for the hapless soul chosen to face her wrath, but long minutes passed and nobody showed up. Irritated, she went to her desk and activated the monitor. All it showed was the smooth curve of a bulkhead. The receptor on the small flight deck must have been jostled out of position. Incompetent fools, all of them.

"I'm waiting!" she snapped. "Report."

The cabin door swished open behind her. She spun around ready to take the person to task for entering without permission. The words caught at her throat.

The man was a section leader according to the markings on his dusty uniform, but his weapon was facing her squarely. Behind him, a portion of the flight deck was visible. It took only a second for the two bodies sprawled by the navigation console to register.

"Hello, Avon," she concluded, composing herself habitually.

"I'm flattered," the voice came distorted by the helmet.

"Blake was freed and they still can't figure out exactly how the security systems were compromised -- who else? Gracious of you to deliver yourself. If Blake is still alive, could you extend it to delivering him as well?"

Avon pushed up the faceplate and approached. "I'm not a gracious man, Servalan." As if to prove his words he roughly grabbed her by the arm to steer her out of the cabin. "But I'll tell you exactly where Blake is."

He pulled her to the comm unit. She went as decorously as possible. "And the catch?"

"Is that you'll deliver him to me."

"Or?"

"Do you need a diagram?" A movement of the rifle emphasized the words as he pushed her into the seat.

She lounged, as if she had chosen to take the seat instead of being shoved into it. "It looks like I'm to be your shield, Avon. You can't kill me.

"Well now, it's true I'd like to keep my shield," he bared his teeth in a smile, "but I wouldn't mind if it was dented a little. How would you like to live without an ear or a nose, Servalan?" The muzzle of the rifle brushed against her face as softly as a caress. "The human body has so many redundancies: ten fingers, ten toes, two breasts -- you may vote on the order of disposal, if you wish. This weapon will cauterize, so we can enjoy ourselves for a very long time."

She believed him. "All right. Where's Blake, and what do you want done?"

He told her. She gave the necessary orders. Avon took out a teleport bracelet and spoke into it. "Blake. Blake?" He didn't receive an answer, but continued anyway. "It's the Federation troops digging through to you, but don't resist. Don't do anything. They'll bring you to me." He waited, but no sound issued. He shrugged, and tucked away the bracelet, seemingly unconcerned.

"Now what?" Servalan asked.

"Now we wait."

Not idly, however. As the first order of business, he secured her hands behind her back with the restraints taken off the dead guard. He pulled the bodies out of sight, then studied the instruments, found and disconnected the ship's tracer signal. He followed up with a check on the power levels, cleared the engine vents, and primed the space flight systems.

Through it all, Servalan watched and noted he wasn't moving with the easy grace she had come to associate with him. He had always had an economy of motion, but now it spoke of a

weariness rather than the restraint of competence he normally displayed. He was panting rather than breathing, perspiration was running down his face, and he wore a pinched expression as if he hurt. "Where do you think you're going to go?" she asked. "This is little more than an in-system shuttle."

"As far as I can," he replied laconically.

She wondered what he was bound by aside from the vessel's restrictions, following his every move until he ran out of things to do and sat down to wait. He seemed to be functioning on sheer will power, which would sooner or later drain. Patiently, she bided her time.

"Supreme Commander," a voice through the communicator claimed their attention. "We have Blake."

"Is he alive?" he mouthed as he flipped the transmit toggle for her. She repeated the question.

"He's unconscious, but he's alive."

"Bring him to me right away," she ordered and Avon cut the connection.

When a small troop carrier sidled close to the cruiser, Avon led her to one side of the hatch, took a position opposite her, and covered his face again. "You will be seen, not heard, unless I tell you otherwise. Behave yourself." The way Avon had placed her, she wouldn't be seen that well, either. He opened the hatch.

* * *

Awareness returned sluggishly and Blake realized he could breathe freely once more. Still disoriented, he stayed immobile, taking stock. The vehicle he seemed to be in was coming to a stop. There were hands, manhandling him as if he were a supply crate: purposefully but not unnecessarily rough. He felt the change of air and light, knew he was being pulled from the vehicle out into the open. He opened his eyes to only slits and saw the black-clad figures now dragging him upright, with his arms around their shoulders.

No. No More.

He left himself limp until he was confident his body would still obey him, then dug in his heels. He jerked to pull out of their hold; the guards, taken by surprise, clutched at him clumsily. All three overbalanced and went down. Blindly, Blake kicked, heard a grunt, felt one of the men roll off him. He clawed to find some purchase on the ground to pull away. The guard, attached to him like a leech, went along. Fleeting, he saw other guards. Running toward them. Servalan -- at the hatch of a cruiser. Waiting for him to be led to her like a sheep.

Not again.

The guard managed to roll over him, his forearm coming across Blake's throat. He choked, felt darkness threaten, and panicked. He didn't want to simply pass out. He bucked, struggled, trying to hurt the guard, do something, anything to make the man lose control.

"No, stay back!" he distantly heard Servalan shout. "Don't damage him, you fool! Let him go!"

The pressure at his throat eased. The guard started to get off, trying to subdue Blake without hurting him. The rebel realized the bandage around his wrist was torn away, exposing the implant. He squirmed until he could touch the spring, and aimed for the guard's eye when the needle shot out. The man jerked back fearfully, and gave the opening Blake had been waiting for. He tore the guard's weapon from the belt holster, rolled and came up on his knees, bringing the gun to bear on the Supreme Commander. Now they would have to stop him. And maybe he could get in a lucky shot.

* * *

Avon instantly realized he had lost all hope of controlling the situation. Servalan had obeyed his whispered directive and stopped the guards from harming Blake, but the idiot had gone too far now. Obviously, he hadn't heard Avon's warning through the bracelet. Avon fired at one trooper that was already aiming at the rebel, while he shoved Servalan with one hand, sending her sprawling onto the deck, out of harm's way. He wasn't about to lose his only bargaining power to Blake's suicide wish.

"Blake, stop! It's me," he shouted.

The rebel didn't fire, but froze. The troopers had frozen as well, but that wouldn't last. "Get in here," Avon shouted again, keeping behind the bulkhead and laying down a covering volley. "Move!"

Then Blake was at the hatch. Instinctively, Avon dropped to one knee and extended his hand to help the man climb up quickly. Blake grasped his hand, and bounded up, sending both of them sprawling with his momentum. Pain shot through Avon. Briefly, he thought he was going to pass out and fought it.

"Avon? Are you hit? Avon!"

Blake's worried voice made him suspect he had cried out with the pain. "No," he managed, pushing the rebel away and scrambling for the hatch himself. "Lift this thing." He reached the button, and the hatch started to come down. "Hurry up!"

The metal door slammed into place before any of the troopers reached it. The cruiser started to glide forward slowly, dull thuds echoing against its hull. "It's primed for launch," Avon called as he programmed the space seals of the hatch. "Fire the retros."

The vessel kept lumbering across sloping ground. "Retros, Blake, now!" Suddenly suspecting why Blake was reticent, he lunged across the rebel's shoulder and hit the button himself. The primaries fired with a roar, instantly incinerating everything outside the craft within a thirty meter circle, and shuddering, the cruiser lifted straight up. Launch pressure moderators came on line automatically, but it still took some effort for Avon to drag himself into a seat.

"That wasn't necessary," Blake said, disapprovingly.

"They could've damaged the seals. Besides, we have a hostage, but secrecy is still safer. Now no one knows where we are." Blake still looked reproachful. Avon found himself getting angry. "If you were so eager to spare them, you shouldn't have forced me to reveal myself."

"How was I supposed to know it was you behind...?"

Avon overrode him, losing control of his voice. "I *told* you. I told you I'd get you out, but you didn't believe me, did you?"

"You're changing your spots a little too abruptly for me, Avon," Blake shouted back, trying to hold the ship steady through the ascent. "I can't even get past the fact you followed me in the first place."

"I shouldn't have. I should've left you to Travis' mercies."

Blake opened his mouth for a retort, seeming to hesitate. He threw a sideways glance at Avon. "Travis? What has Travis got to do...?"

The weight pushing them into the seats lifted abruptly, and was replaced by a floaty sensation as the ship shot out of the planet's gravity well. Blake quickly cut off the moderators, keyed in the stabilizers and the gravity control. "You followed me to Exbar." It was a conclusion, not a question.

Avon realized Blake had been referring to his presence on Earth; he hadn't known about Exbar. He seemed to have assumed that the one communicator contact had come from the ship. "Much to my regret," he mumbled, suddenly too drained even to raise his voice. He had seen Blake establish normal gravity, but he was still lightheaded, disoriented. The fever was gaining the upper hand.

"After all those objections, warnings -- hell, *threats*...why Avon?"

"This isn't the time or the place, Blake," he said, indicating Servalan. She was looking too interested in the exchange.

Blake seemed to agree. He changed the subject. "Where are we going?"

"Not far, in this thing." He closed his eyes against the dizziness. "To an abandoned satellite. It's almost in Venus' trajectory now. The coordinates are already in. Just follow them."

"Isn't that rather close to Earth?"

The Liberator had been spotted in Earth orbit. Avon was sure Jenna would not have revealed their route into the system and she would return that way. And perhaps the solar panels of the satellite could be activated again for enough power to boost the small craft's communication capabilities. Exactly who was supposed to attempt that feat, he had no idea. He didn't trust Blake's ability. Neither did he trust his own at the moment. Even speech was getting beyond him. "Best place...take my word for it. We'll rest. The Liberator...will find us there." He had to rest, just for a minute. He discarded the helmet, rolled his head to one side, caught a glimpse of Servalan, who had managed to get herself to a seat. She was looking too intent for

Avon's taste, like a predator about to pounce. A warning cut across the haze creeping through his brain, but he simply had to rest. Just for a few minutes. No more.

* * *

The dark man stood over him, studying him as if he were a mildly interesting specimen. "It's merely a hallucination, you know," he said. A casual observation.

"Go away." He was too hot. Burning. Yet shivering.

The man shrugged disinterestedly, merged with the shadows as if he belonged to them. Left him alone with the red-hot inferno. Too damn hot.

Cool blue.

Parched, he turned to it. She had always been a cool presence, to quench the fire. Of passion. Of turmoil. Of fever.

"Fanciful," commented the mocking voice from the shadows.

She gave him the touch he thirsted for. Cool. Cold.

Ice cold.

"Dead cold," the relentless voice corrected.

The touch was withdrawn. "You didn't come back," she said.

"I tried." But she was gone. He said it to the dark presence instead. He had to say it to somebody. "I tried. You know I tried."

"I know. Did she?"

"I tried," he repeated.

"No good enough. She died."

"My fault," he accepted it. The hell-fire, too.

"True."

"Never again." Please.

"It's merely an hallucination," the shadow-man pronounced, closed the circle. Going round and round. Out of control. Rolling, tumbling, spinning...

* * *

Avon woke up. He was spinning. Bile rose in his throat. He swallowed hard, and in another second found the presence of mind to close his eyes again. He wasn't spinning. The ship was. The gravity compensators were keeping him securely in the seat, and once he cut off the sight

of the satellite as it spun past the ports the disorientation went away. He took a steadying breath, opened his eyes. He had slept -- if it had been sleep -- longer than he had intended and they were already at their destination. Blake was struggling to control the spin.

"What happened?" he asked, got no reply. At the unfamiliar controls of a strange ship, and not in top condition himself, Blake probably had not been able to approach the drifting derelict properly and sent the ship spinning while trying to avoid collision.

Avon found a reserve to tap as he usually did in an emergency. He reached across the panel for the controls. "Let me."

Blake roughly swept his hand away with the back of one of his, making Avon gasp, and grabbed the lever again. "Stay back!" he spat out. "I've had more than enough of your help."

Avon stared at him, taken aback by the hostility. "You can't contr--"

"Shut up! Right now, it's much easier for me to crash this thing, so shut up!"

Avon bit his lip, not ready to gamble with Blake's mood -- whatever had caused it under the circumstances.

Blake finally put some distance between the satellite and the tumbling ship, and brought it under control. Then he eased close again, looking for, Avon could tell, a docking hatch so the vessel could safely stay there, moving with the huge construct's own drift. The second hatch he attempted sealed with the ship, now only another undetectable metal protrusion, lost within the satellite's immense proportions.

A long silence. Then Blake leaned back in his seat, swiveled it around so he was facing Avon, and laced his fingers on his lap, looking incongruously mild. *Eye of the storm*, Avon sensed.

"You know, Avon, for a while there, I thought I was wrong for not listening to you. Would you believe, if I wasn't somewhat discomforted about that, I would've actually apologized. Isn't that terribly amusing, Avon? It's a riot, isn't it?"

Avon wished he weren't so lethargic. He didn't think he could deal with Blake. The man sounded determined to be particularly difficult. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought Travis had lured me to Exbar to sell me to Servalan for the price of his own neck. Which is what happened. When Servalan showed up, Travis bargained me away. But it wasn't Travis' own little plot, was it?"

"She told you," Avon concluded wearily. He didn't bother looking at the woman. He could already envision her smug expression. He wished he had told Blake himself. Had meant to, but hadn't wanted to do it during a period when they had to depend on each other.

"She told me that *someone* informed her of Travis' whereabouts -- at a most opportune time, as it turned out. Someone who transmitted from the Fourth Sector. She wonders who that... informant...was. I don't."

Avon winced at the word. "You're right about one thing, Blake. Travis didn't invite you in his charming manner to sell to Servalan. He meant to *kill* you.

"I know that. Right now that has a refreshing honesty to it. I would've preferred that -- to what I owe you." His right hand moved, drawing attention to the implant.

Avon stared at it listlessly, then blinked, looked away. "Did you know your uncle betrayed you, Blake?"

"How astute of you to have noticed. Of course, *you* would."

So he had found out. "But you're not angry at him."

Blake was losing the calm tone. "He was trying to protect the only thing of value in his life. What's your excuse?"

There was nothing Avon cared to say to that. He shrugged.

"I thought so," Blake continued. "Heaven knows you never gave me much reason to have faith in you, Avon, but I always thought it'd come at me from the front. I never expected it in my back."

That got Avon angry enough to speak. "Did it occur to you to wonder why she told you, or do you think it was out of the goodness of her heart? She's trying to set us at each other's throats..." he paused, feeling too tired, too sick to fight, "and she doesn't have to try very hard, it seems," he finished resignedly.

"I refuse to take responsibility for that state of affairs. I suggest you look to yourself. I don't know why you did it, Avon, and I don't want to know. Maybe you have something in common with Orac -- which wouldn't surprise me in the least. You made dire predictions and made sure they came true. There's only one question; why did you follow me?"

"Because..." Avon studied his leather encased hands lying dormant on his lap, "...never again, Blake," he whispered, not necessarily for Blake's edification.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand."

"Yes, since it's your reasoning I probably wouldn't, which leaves me grateful no end."

"Blake...enough."

"More than enough! We agree on that at least."

Blake got up and headed for the single cabin of the small craft, making Avon suspect that the man didn't care to share his space with him for another minute. "Blake, once this is over...if it's over... I'm through. I'm leaving."

"Fine. This time I'll thank you for it." He disappeared into the cabin; the door closed him off.

Avon sat still for a long minute, then he glanced at Servalan. "I trust that was entertaining." To her credit, she didn't try to dissemble, just gave him a look and a shrug that said she was simply being true to herself. She was consistent, at least. "The round is yours, Supreme Commander. My compliments."

"Praise, indeed. Thank you."

He leaned his head back. He knew why he was getting hazy. He had started having trouble breathing, which caused him to take panting breaths. That in turn made him hyperventilate. He tried to control it, found it impossible. "Is there a medi-kit on board?" He felt too tired to look for it himself, but knew he needed some antibiotics.

"What's wrong, Avon, feeling out of sorts? I have a lot of excellent doctors I can put at your disposal."

"Yes." With a slight tilt of his head, he indicated the cabin. "I've seen their handiwork."

"Oh, come on, Avon, you know I wouldn't waste your potential like that. The Federation will settle for Blake. They need never know about you."

"You miscalculate the impact of your meddling, Servalan. I'm not feeling that vengeful toward Blake."

"All right, assure his safety if it makes you feel better. For you, I will give up even Blake. I'm being very reasonable, Avon, so why don't you stop this nonsense right now?"

* * *

In the cabin, in front of the monitor -- out of alignment -- it didn't give visual access, but the voices came through -- Blake checked the power level of the rifle he had taken from the guard, then wondered if it would be worth it. He had a couple of hours at best.

* * *

Avon closed his eyes. Servalan got the impression he was distancing himself from her.

"I know what you want from me," he said, "but at the moment I can't think of a single thing I'd want from you."

"Anonymity to start with," she proposed. "Then, in order: safety, wealth, power -- in exchange for all your knowledge."

He snorted. "Wealth, perhaps. For a while anyway. You wouldn't share power. And safety in your proximity is a contradiction in terms. I'm not a fool, Servalan."

"Then don't act like one. You're capable enough to keep yourself useful to me, and clever enough to assure your safety." *And immodest enough to know all that*, she didn't add.

"No sale," he said simply.

She insisted. It wasn't just a short-term ploy to get out of her immediate predicament. She truly considered him priceless. All of the Liberator's technology -- and most of Orac's, she'd bet -- was inside that dark head resting wearily against the back of a flight seat. She wouldn't even resort to ripping it out, not unless he forced her. He had too much potential. "Think about it, Avon. I don't believe you ever wanted any part of Blake or his crusade. He made it clear he no longer wants or needs you. You're going to part company anyway; no time like the present. He and his suicidal course are not your concern."

He wasn't listening to her. He had straightened to glance about. Perhaps he was searching for the medi-kit. He certainly looked like he could use it. "What do you need, Avon?"

"Your ships usually carry a complement of mutoids. There would have to be supplies..." he trailed off, pushed with his elbows out of the seat to search.

Not the medi-kit then, at least not as first priority. Incredible. "Next to the flight console," she directed. "The cabinet under the scanner guidance unit." Much good it would do him or Blake.

He extracted a long, glassy capsule holding the light-green, viscid liquid, turned it around in his hands, frowning at it.

"It *is* a permutation of blood," she supplied. "Adapted and distilled. The color is altered, oh, just to spare the sensibilities, I suppose."

Closely, he studied the coupling mechanism, the outlet that needed to be in contact with its proper attachment to function. He'd notice it was totally inaccessible to a needle. "There's no way to get into it, Avon. Besides, it shouldn't be exposed to air."

"How is it utilized?"

She realized he didn't know how a mutoid normally fed. While the wrist intracaths -- primarily meant to serve in emergencies -- were visible without gloves, the chest implants were hidden under the flap of the uniform. Obviously, he had never seen one. It was useless information, so she gave it. "It links to a chest implant and supplies a steady drip."

"Blake doesn't..."

"He doesn't have one, I know." She indicated the capsule. "That won't do him any good in any case. It's too potent. His system won't tolerate it."

"So the modification is not complete."

"Let's just say it's different."

He put away the useless capsule and came to stand over her. "Tell me about these different modifications, Servalan."

"Why are you interested?"

"All knowledge is useful," he replied, making her suspect it was his stock answer to many questions he preferred to avoid.

"Very well, Avon, just to prove I can be more forthcoming than you seem to think." She noted how quickly he resumed his seat once she agreed to comply. The sleep had restored him somewhat, but he was losing ground again. "The radical modification is when all unnecessary organs are removed at once, some replaced by cybernetics that'll keep the body functioning in its altered state. Controlled modification is when the organs are temporarily left in place, but suppressed or agitated chemically and bio-electronically -- there are three implants in Blake's body -- until they atrophy."

"The latter is an interim state then."

"It doesn't have to precede the radical modification, but it can."

"Is it reversible?"

She drew the line at that. "Since we don't encourage it, I never gave it a thought."

It took him a moment of concentration to come up with the next question. "If it's not necessary to the final step, why controlled modification for Blake instead of radical?"

She didn't think he'd appreciate the humor of it, and settled for a noncommittal shrug.

He studied her, then chuckled softly. "You didn't want all the organs removed at once, did you? What's the matter, Servalan, your much-touted surgeons couldn't come up with a procedure to suit your specifications? What was he supposed to be, your personal attendant?" Abruptly, all traces of amusement vanished from his face; it set in harsh lines. "Once he was blanked, he'd have had no choice but to obey your every...whim."

"Why, Avon, I do believe you're furious with me. On Blake's behalf?"

He turned away. "I abhor waste. He wasn't meant to be your pet. How indiscriminate of you."

"Perhaps."

"But so amusing," he finished for her. "I see that I've been overestimating you, Supreme Commander."

That was a definite dismissal. Servalan sensed that anything she said would meet with an uncompromising wall of silence and disdain. She spared herself that indignity and conceded the second round to Blake.

* * *

The rebel sat facing the now-silent monitor, his weapon laid aside and forgotten, wondering what to make of the exchange. Perhaps he was simply too tired to sustain it, but the anger had drained. It left room to think.

Why was Avon still concerned with his problems?

Why had he been concerned with them in the first place, in spite of causing them?

No, that sounded wrong. Avon didn't believe in his cause, thought Blake a deluded fool at best, a dangerous lunatic at worst. But he knew that Avon wouldn't find pleasure in seeing him fail or get destroyed.

Not in spite of causing the problems then. Because of it? The man's own answer had been worse than no answer. And Avon hadn't expected him to understand it. But Avon didn't lie. He twisted words with uncanny mastery to suit himself, but he didn't lie. He probably considered it beneath him. He had given an answer, however confoundingly cryptic.

That stirred an echo. Blake tried to place it. He remembered another enigmatic answer Avon had given him recently. For his return to the Liberator from XK72. Another answer Avon hadn't expected him to understand -- no, he had sounded more like he had been throwing down a challenge. All right. He'd work through it.

Avon had come back. In case the ship had not made it, according to him. But if the ship had been destroyed while he sat safely at the space station, Avon would've been free. The Federation would have thought him dead along with the rest of them. No man as free as a dead man. It couldn't have been more perfect if Avon had arranged it himself.

Arranged it himself?

No, he knew no blame was due to Avon in that case; quite the contrary...

All at once, he understood. He would have blamed Avon. Without his presence to refute it, Blake would've found it almost natural to suspect him. The man had wanted to avoid that bad enough to risk even his own life?

Blake thought that maybe Avon's dire threats weren't really threats, but advance warnings -- as if the man wanted to make sure that, whatever else he could be accused of, he wouldn't be accused of duplicity.

And this time? He didn't have the answer, but suddenly he knew it had nothing to do with betrayal. It all fell into place, and he realized Avon had been desperately trying to prove that. Not necessarily to Blake. But just to prove it. Was it so important to him then?

All right, he decided. I'll let you save your soul. Who knows, one day I might need you to return the favor.

He shivered, as if icy fingers had brushed past, shook off the feeling. He didn't believe in premonition. He rubbed his neck muscles, which didn't do any good; there was little strength in his fingers. He took a deep breath., and could almost feel how slowly it reached his brain through his lazy circulation. However, it dawned on him that every breath he took now, Avon had given him. He left the cabin.

Avon avoided looking at him. Blake went to the receptor and re-aligned it, training it directly on Servalan. Then he went back to the cabin to stand by the door. "Avon, would you come in

here for a minute, please? I think we gave the Supreme Commander enough amusement for one day."

Avon looked at him, his reluctance evident. "A bit late, aren't you?"

He knew what to say. "You're right. I'm sorry."

That conceded enough to Avon and brought him over, but Blake didn't miss the mocking half-smile that said the man was perfectly aware of being steered.

"Let me guess," Avon said once they had privacy, "you've thought better of losing my abilities, and for the sake of my use to your cause, you're willing to try and straighten things out. Is it to be abject apologies, or benevolent pardon?"

"Neither. If all is well by some miracle, you're free to leave, as you always were. If you wish. But it's mostly a moot point right now, isn't it? I may not have much time. I don't want to spend it at odds with you."

"Oh, I see, this is the sympathy gathering stage. Forgive me for being slow, but you usually don't bother with that."

The best of intentions tended to take a beating in Avon's presence. Blake sighed. "You don't make it easy, Avon."

Unexpectedly, Avon gave an open smile. "If it were easy, you wouldn't try so hard."

They sobered simultaneously and seemed to decide mutually to drop that subject. Blake returned to his original purpose. "For anything I said out there that was unfair, I apologize."

"Very carefully put." Avon waved away his attempt to speak. "It's all right, Blake. I can hardly fault you for being cautious where caution is indicated. I just wish you'd make a more general habit of it."

"Avon, why did you send that message to Servalan?"

"You said you didn't want to know."

"I said a lot of things. I was angry," Blake admitted.

"It seemed the only rational thing to do. At the time. I thought she'd get to Travis long before we arrived, solve the problem before it became a problem."

It was my problem, Blake was tempted to say, but swallowed it. He had already made clear time and again on the way to Exbar. Obviously, Avon had turned a deaf ear to it. Instinctively, he sensed that neither of them was ready to delve into the whys of that. "Are you telling me you had good intentions?"

"Well, you know what they say about those."

I made a mistake, can we leave it at that, Avon seemed to be saying. The rebel inclined his head, granting the request; Avon had been doing more than Blake had ever thought him capable of to rectify his mistake.

"Is that all, Blake?"

Maybe it was because they had cleared the air -- as clear as it got between them anyway. Or maybe it was the first breathing space they had had for two days. But suddenly Blake looked at Avon and saw him. Really saw him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Wrong?"

"I've never seen you look worse, Avon. What's wrong?"

"It hasn't been an invigorating time," he chose to say.

Blake touched his forehead. "You're burning up."

Avon stepped back. "I'm all right. Just tired."

"No, you're not." Blake reached again. Avon's hands came up, the equivalent of a no-trespassing sign. Blake took a look and ignored the message. "Your hands are shaking." He took one of them, intending to lead the man to a seat. Avon hissed, pulled his hand back as if burned.

"All right, Avon, what exactly is wrong? I can see something is."

"If you must know, it's an infection." Grudging.

Blake jumped to the only conclusion that presented itself. "The needle was dirty."

"Of course not." Avon looked offended. "If I have to put a needle in me, I have enough sense to sterilize it first."

"What then?"

Avon sighed, dropped into the seat by the desk. "To get around, I had skin grafts done, duplicating the prints of a guard. We used synthetic implants to match the shape of my hands to his."

"And you're allergic to them," Blake concluded, but didn't belabor the issue. Avon wouldn't appreciate it. Pulling the gloves off would be painful, so Blake didn't ask to see the extent of the damage. He looked for the medi-kit instead, now aware of why Avon had asked for it. Knowing Servalan, one had to be at hand in the cabin. Shortly, he found it.

He looked at the contents in dismay. "Bandages, sealant, alcohol, splints...the medication containers are color coded." Servalan would know, if they were willing to take her word for it.

"Never mind, Blake. Who knows what nasty surprises her medi-kits might contain. Dump those bandages, though, and give me their bag." Avon placed it over his mouth to breathe in and out of. After a time, he pulled it away. "That's better."

Blake sank heavily onto the edge of the desk, turning so that he could still keep an eye on the monitor. "Avon, we're getting to the point of no return. We have to do something."

"I thought that perhaps we could bleed enough power from the solar collectors of that pile of junk out there and contact the Liberator..." Avon trailed off, shrugging. "But, frankly, I'm not up to donning a life support suit to wander around that monstrous derelict." He lifted his hands fractionally. "Besides..."

Blake understood intricate work was beyond his normally capable hands. That had to be galling. "I'll go." It wasn't hard to read the look Avon bestowed on him. "All right, I'll try not to blow half the station away." He got a ghost of a smile in return.

"You're not in shape for it either. Forget it, Blake. It won't get them here any faster."

"So we wait."

"Unless you have a better idea. However, I suggest we wait out there. He inclined his head toward the monitor. "Our guest is getting fidgety, and that makes me nervous."

* * *

Servalan took one look at the two men as they came out and settled into the flight seats, and decided that the attempt to drive a wedge between them had failed. This time. All right, she'd go to the next phase. She should concentrate on Blake. The way he looked and moved, Avon was going to, very soon now, drop out of the picture.

Only, they weren't giving her an opening. It felt like hours, and they were both quiet, motionless. In fact, Blake looked asleep. Avon was not far behind. That was fine, too. She kept from the slightest move which might draw attention. But it was hard. Her bound hands were numb now, but her shoulders ached abominably. She gritted her teeth, promised retribution to make herself feel a bit better, and kept still.

Avon raised his head, caught sight of Blake, and bolted upright in the seat. "Blake." He reached, didn't touch. "Blake!"

"Hmmm?" The rebel gave a start, shaking his head. "What?"

Avon slumped in the seat again. "Nothing. I thought you were out again."

"No... I..." Blake looked particularly sheepish, then collected himself. "It's more boredom than anything else."

Servalan was caught by the transformation. Eyes closed, features slack, he had looked ponderous, graceless. Once the intelligent eyes opened, the face mirrored the force inside, and his body came under his conscious control, he was formidable. As with any formidable enemy, Servalan's natural inclination was to chip at him, break him down bit by bit.

Avon was giving a doubtful look at the rebel. "Relax, Avon," he said in answer to it. "I can't move mountains at the moment..."

"You never could," Avon didn't seem able to resist interjecting.

"But I can function," Blake continued as if he were used to such interruptions.

"And then you go out like a burned out flux generator."

"So? I'm only unconscious. Chances are I can stay like that for a long time without harm. Makes sense, doesn't it? A tool is usually programmed to shut down most of the power drain and lie dormant."

"You're not a tool, Blake. The parallel could be inapplicable."

"You made the comparison," Blake pointed out.

"So I did," Avon agreed without repentance. "We don't have an owner's manual," the dark eyes found Servalan, "but we have the owner." He got up to approach. "Well, Supreme Commander, suppose you tell me exactly what to expect."

Why not? "The assumption is correct. Mutoids aren't cheap items. Production and maintenance costs are considerable. So they're not manufactured to be disposable." Her choice of words set Avon's mouth in a grim line, the fever-bright eyes acquired dangerous sparks. Fascinating. She was doing exactly what he had done, but he obviously thought he had the right and she didn't.

She decided to continue. She was taking a risk with Avon, she knew. However, it would get to Blake, give him a sense of diminishment. "It'll shut off until it can be re-activated."

With a speed and strength she wouldn't have expected of him right then, Avon's hand closed around her throat, fingers digging into the neck muscles. "*He.*"

She set her teeth against the pain, keeping her smile in place. "Only because of a temporary indulgence on my part." The pressure switched to her windpipe. She choked.

The objection came from Blake. "Leave it, Avon. She's only trying to provoke you."

So he wasn't as thin-skinned as she had assumed.

And, more surprisingly, Avon listened. He kept his hand in place, but eased off. "Mind your manners, Servalan, for, as Blake can tell you, I have none. Now tell me exactly how long the unconscious state lasts."

"I don't know. I never concern myself with incidentals." The fingers tightened warningly. She thought better of it. "Until he's revived or dead. Really, Avon, that's all I can tell you."

"Once he's out, how can I tell he's getting to the limit?"

"You can't." She was sure she had not unduly stressed either word, but Avon seemed to sense something wrong.

"When you answer readily, Servalan, I wonder what you're leaving unsaid."

It was Blake who put his finger on it. "Who can then?" He seemed to have a sharper people-sense than Avon.

Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Either way, it would leave her with one man to deal with. "You can," she answered the rebel. "Rather, your body will."

"Start over," Avon told her. "Tell me exactly what will happen. Be very careful. You'll never make me believe you've made an honest mistake."

"He will wake up, very hungry."

"By then, the Liberator might be here, Avon."

"I admire your optimism, Blake, but it can't be that easy. Survival instinct resides in the primitive brain. If I were dealing with a mutoid, I wouldn't feel very safe with his programming at that stage."

She realized what made the two men a team to contend with, regardless of how they got along. They shored each other's weak points.

"You wouldn't either," Avon told her. "What's the fail-safe, Servalan?"

Avon wouldn't believe she didn't know. "That level of agitation will show up in the body chemistry."

"It will override the suppression of adrenaline I suppose. And?"

"The implants will instantly collapse the arteries and starve..."

"The brain of oxygen, I can follow." He finally removed his hand from her throat. "We can't wait until you pass out, Blake."

"What do you suggest we do?"

"Well now..." His feral smile sent a chill through Servalan. "I knew you'd be of some use," he told her. "Here's food, Blake. Of course, I can't guarantee the taste, but..."

"Stop it!"

Servalan relaxed at Blake's objection. She shouldn't have worried. Blake was a fool and always would be.

Avon shrugged at her. "What can you do? He has discriminating tastes." She wondered if he was really that calm about it or was it a performance for her benefit as Avon went to Blake. "Beggars can't be choosers, you know."

"It isn't funny."

"No, it's serious. I can understand the revulsion, but it's irrational. Her blood is no less pure than mine. At the moment, a lot purer, in fact."

"Cut it out, Avon."

Their voices dropped. Servalan had to strain to hear.

"What's the problem? You took it from me."

"I don't remember being given a choice. Besides, that's different."

"How?"

Blake mumbled something.

"What?"

"I said you're a friend."

"I always knew there would be a catch to this friend business," Avon grumbled, but there was no venom in the words.

Blake seemed to take them in the same manner. "Avon, you were willing. She won't be."

"And that concerns you?"

"It has to. If it didn't, what would be the difference between me and a true mutoid?"

Avon sighed, said not another word, and sat back down.

Long minutes later, he spoke again, the short breaths that had been interrupting his speech now audible, the breaks between his words more pronounced. "Your immunity system must be phenomenal...now, has to be geared to...input from...various sources, some not so pure. Stands to reason. There may even be a filter implant..." He seemed to reach a decision. He clenched his teeth, tugged at one of his gloves, catching his breath then letting it hiss out as it came off. He held out his hand. "Go ahead."

Blake was looking at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous...I'm not even being...magnanimous. If that needle worked both ways...I'd let you take it only...to give it back. I think your system can purify it. As it is..."

"No!"

"Blake, I can't...hold out much longer. One of us has to...function."

Servalan was so intent on Avon that she jumped when Blake slammed his fist on the console.

"That...doesn't help," Avon said. "We need time. You know this is the...only way to get it."

Blake glanced at Servalan. Apprehension flooded through her again.

Avon shook his head slowly. "You won't do it. I know it...you know it. Stop wasting time."

"Avon, I hate this."

"Emotional response. Surely you don't expect me...to pamper it."

"No. No, I don't." But he didn't move.

"Blake."

"All right!" He still didn't move.

"You should feel flattered, Blake. I'm trusting you...to get me out of this...but you have to be alive to do it."

Blake moved so suddenly that Servalan gave a start. He went into the cabin, then came out in a minute to settle down on his knees in front of Avon. He took the offered hand, cradled it in one palm, and brought his other hand over to align their wrists carefully. The needle flashed briefly, then disappeared under skin. Avon caught his breath.

"Sorry."

"It's all right. Better than...I managed."

"Tell me the instant it gets bad." He grimaced, corrected himself, "Worse."

Fascinated, Servalan watched. Blake was intent on their joined hands, so she was the one who noticed that Avon was in trouble, and trying to bear it. She wouldn't say anything, of course. If the man was foolish enough to -- no, he wasn't.

"Enough, Blake." Instantly, the rebel started to pull back. "Don't!" Avon said quickly.

"Retract the needle...first...just in case it keeps on...drawing."

Blake did as told, put pressure on Avon's wrist with his thumb, and looked up at him anxiously. "Avon?"

With visible effort, Avon opened his eyes. "That wasn't...nearly enough."

"More than I had. Thank you."

Avon's eyes were closing again. "I...tried. Your turn." He slumped.

Blake swore under his breath. Gently he leaned the other man back in the seat, and got to his feet. He was about to sit back down when he paused, looked from the unconscious figure to her, then seemed to decide something. Laboriously, he got a hold on Avon and half-carried, half-dragged him into the cabin.

Servalan considered. Unlikely that she could gain advantage over Blake at the moment. Avon had given him a respite and a purpose. This time, she might have to endure the situation. Her time would come. Inadvertently, Avon had given something else as well. To her. Now she knew his vulnerable spot. One day, it would prove to be his downfall.

* * *

There was a bed in the cabin, behind a glittering curtain. It'd be more comfortable than a flight seat. Also, something in Blake had balked at leaving Avon in Servalan's view while he looked so helpless. However, he thought as he saw the personalized alcove, it was just as well the man was out. Judging by the austere taste displayed in Avon's private quarters, he wouldn't appreciate his present surroundings in the slightest. It was designed to pamper the senses in a rather indulgent way. Blake pushed the shiny velvet pillows and the fur cover aside, started to lay Avon down. He took note of the excessive heat of the face resting in the crook of his neck, and yanked away the sheet first.

He was exhausted by the time he got done with stripping Avon and swaddling him in the sheet he had soaked in cold water. As first-aid went, it was a poor excuse, but all he could do. In here, anyway. He went back to the flight deck.

Without undue nicety, he yanked Servalan out of her seat into the one Avon had occupied. "All right, Supreme Commander, listen well. You're going to get on that communicator and contact your headquarters. You will tell them to give you a hook-up to the most powerful comm satellite and restrict it to your use only. Then, when I tell you which route we're taking, you're going to order it cleared of all Federation traffic. In short, you will help me get to the Liberator as fast as possible, with no delays whatsoever. Be very, very careful."

"Why should I?"

"Because, Servalan, I have nothing to lose at this moment, except that man in there. If I so much as think my energy is going to give out before we reach the Liberator, you're dead. Or do you imagine I'd leave him helpless and alone in your tender mercies."

* * *

The indicators on Jenna's board changed, seemingly of their own volition. They signaled a slight veer off course, but it had taken so frustratingly long to get underway that she wasn't ready for another mishap. "What the...Zen, what're you doing?"

The ship's course is no longer under primary control.

"What! Now what? What's happening? Jenna, what...?"

"Shut up, Vila! Zen, what do you mean? Who's controlling the ship?"

The Orac computer.

"Orac!" She turned to the clear box. "Explain. What do you mean by changing course?"

I don't mean anything by changing course. I have no interest in your course, Orac answered, more testily than usual. **However, as I have been ordered to do so, I was obliged to comply.**

"Ordered? By whom?"

By Blake. The Liberator is now on an interception course with his vessel.

Everybody crowded around Orac, which told them that, no, it could not open communications with Blake, it had been ordered to keep transmission silence as a precaution and obey flight instructions, so they all had to be patient and stop bothering it until such time when their contributions were required.

* * *

It was the middle of the ship's night, and the women were chafing at the bit while Vila, curled up on the couch, was blissfully catching up on his sleep -- when Orac finally told them to make themselves useful. After finding out the situation on the Liberator from the grumpy computer, Blake had ordered for the guard to be teleported into the small ship, and for himself and Avon to be brought home as soon as the rebel collected the guard's teleport bracelet, and disabled Servalan's means of communication. Orac imperiously dispatched Cally to the teleport console and Vila to the medical unit to get the gurney Blake had asked for.

* * *

Avon opened his eyes. It was almost dark, but the reflections of tell-tales on the smooth, featureless ceiling, the muted sounds and the smells of the place were comfortingly familiar. He felt he could safely lie there until he sorted himself out.

Finally, he decided he was acceptably well, and on the Liberator. More precisely, in the medical unit. So Blake had managed to do something right. He rubbed his face, which was cool now, felt a thin film covering his hands, and lifted both to squint at them. They were no longer swollen or painful. Most importantly, they felt like his hands again, except for the slightly slick feeling of the spray-dressing which would dissolve in a few hours. More reassuring than any other indication was that he wasn't hooked up to any monitor and Cally wasn't hovering over him. It could only mean he was perfectly all right.

Deciding he could now afford to consider more than his own self, he looked around. Blake was on the next couch, covered to the chest, asleep. Orac was between them, silently blinking to itself. The key was in place, but not activated. He could certainly ask Orac about the rebel's condition, but voices might wake him up. After all, they were back on the ship now. It wouldn't do at all to let Blake wake up and find him questioning Orac on the man's behalf. Already there had been too much dependency, too few barriers between them in the last days for Avon's taste. It was past time to retreat to their safe distances.

Avon did not feel the slightest compunction at making a unilateral decision for both of them. Blake was blind to danger -- in this as well as in everything else.

Quietly, very quietly, he swung his legs around, waited until he was steady enough, then approached the other bed. With a move that barely disturbed even the air, he lifted a portion of the cover to expose Blake's right forearm. He softly touched his fingertips to the inside of the rebel's wrist, feeling warm and smooth flesh instead of cold metal. He replaced the cover. Cally wouldn't have removed Blake's only way of feeding himself if the reversal of the modification had defied Orac's capabilities.

That was enough for now. He could wait for anything else he'd want to know. He went back to his own bed for some more rest. Who could tell what impossible feat Blake would invent as soon as the man got back on his feet?

* * *

After fighting it for days, and sometimes resorting to the sneakiest tactics to have her way, Cally had finally let Blake out of the medical unit. She had been there almost constantly. Jenna had been a frequent visitor, and Vila had popped in and out at the most unpredictable -- usually inconvenient -- times, chattering brightly. His latest favorite topic had made Blake tell him that if Vila breathed one word of it to Avon -- that their computer expert had returned to the ship wearing nothing but a wet scarlet-satin sheet and reposing against Blake's chest -- the thief was going to consider life-time exile on Cygnus Alpha a paradise vacation compared to his remaining time on board the Liberator.

After pronouncing himself absolutely, positively in no need of anything the med-unit had to offer, and taking himself away before Blake was not even fully awake, Avon had been totally absent. Not that Blake had expected anything else. So, it was the first time Blake saw the man when he rounded the corridor that led to the cabins and almost ran into him.

"About time you got off your back."

The trace of hostility in his voice made Blake raise an inquiring eyebrow.

"Jenna said you're taking us to Albion -- minus explanations, as usual. If you can imperiously issue orders, you can damn well get up and contribute your share of the work."

"If you wanted to know, all you had to do was ask."

"Save your breath, Blake. You'll tell exactly what you want to tell, no more, and exactly when you want to tell it, no sooner. Which, as experience has proved, will always fall short of what I consider acceptable. So don't waste my time." He started to walk past, but paused to dig into a pocket. "Oh, yes, here." He handed Blake a small plasti-sheet.

"What is this?"

"It's a description of how a holograph works."

Blake was confused, then it clicked. He started to smile.

"Never could abide ignorance," Avon said before the smile had a chance to mature. "So we must do what we can."

Blake gave up on the smile, and stifled the sigh. He knew why he was stretched across the rack. "You're determined not to let me say even a thank you, aren't you?"

"For what? It was no trouble. If you had bothered to think of it, you could've just as easily asked the computer."

"Not *that*," Blake said impatiently, tucking away the plasti-sheet into a pocket. He should have known Avon would make him pay with a vengeance for their recent lapses. *To be fair*, he thought, *we'll make each other pay -- in the same coin*. He made one more attempt. "For...."

Avon interrupted, making Blake wonder why he bothered. "Unnecessary, as well as inapplicable. I didn't do anything for you, Blake, as you well know. I was merely trying to rectify a mistake. You were incidental, so don't flatter yourself. When and if I do something for you alone, then you may say thank you, nicely. But don't hold your breath."

Blake's volatile temper, which Avon could aggravate without half trying, threatened to flare. "Don't hold *your* breath!" he snapped.

That, it seemed, cheered Avon. He smiled brightly. "Oh, don't worry. I won't."

He walked away, leaving Blake, as usual, with the urge to strangle him. The only consolation was the certainty that it was a mutual feeling. *Modus operandi*.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!